INTERVIEW WITH DOUG LEMOV

THE District Management JOURNAL

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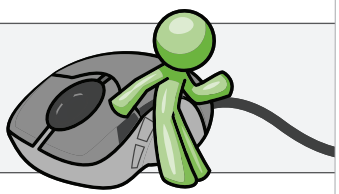

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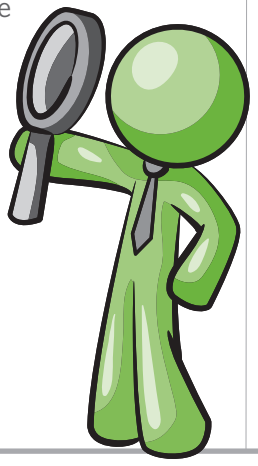

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John J-H Kim, Editor

ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES are posing tremendous challenges for school districts around the country, yet the current environment for school reform is stimulating. We are witnessing the convergence of federal, state and local policy priorities, fueled in part by competitive grant-making like the Race to the Top initiative. Alignment of educational policy to drive student achievement results has arguably never been greater than it is today. In response to both the policy and fiscal environments, districts are demonstrating innovative approaches for not only doing more with less but also working *differently.* DMC members in particular are using creative processes to allow continued investment in growing student achievement and improving operational efficiency while responding to fiscal pressures. We are pleased to profile some of those efforts here.

This issue of the *District Management Journal* highlights a spectrum of innovations that focus on improving student achievement while carefully considering resource allocation. Our Spotlight details the shifting focus from teacher quality to teacher effectiveness, which encompasses the instructional core of a district's operations. This is complemented by our interview with Doug Lemov, author of the best-selling book *Teach Like a Champion*, which devotes significant commentary and insight on continuous improvement and timely feedback to improve teacher practice. Teacher effectiveness is a vast topic, and DMC's recent Leadership Development Meeting in Boston addressed the systemic nature of the work, beginning with the insights coming from new approaches to designing and implementing teacher evaluation systems. This issue's Toolkit is designed to help readers structure their thinking around key design and process considerations for new teacher evaluation systems.

Complementing the core issue of teacher effectiveness are feature articles by Alan Ingram, superintendent of Springfield Public Schools (MA), and James Merrill, superintendent of Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VA), and case studies on Simsbury Public Schools (CT) and Fairfax County Public Schools (VA), each telling a different story of successful district leadership and management. From Alan Ingram, we learn about comprehensive realignment of a district, its strategy, and the culture necessary to enable change. Jim Merrill shares insights on a large-scale transformation to refocus the district on community priorities and 21st-century learning objectives. DMC's case study on Simsbury illuminates core issues in change management while telling a compelling story of simultaneous academic and financial improvement. Finally, our case study on Fairfax is a timely follow-up to Superintendent Jack Dale's feature article in Volume 3 of *The District Management Journal*, and focuses on well-structured stakeholder engagement processes in managing a second year of significant budget reductions.

As the country tries to see its way through an unconvincing economic recovery, strong school district leaders are not waiting. The features and cases profiled in this issue highlight how many members of The District Management Council are using innovation to steer their school districts and their communities through these difficult times and effect positive change.

—John J-H Kim

How to Teach Like a Champion: **An Interview with Doug Lemov**

DOUG LEMOV'S *TEACH LIKE A CHAMPION* has been widely acclaimed for its practical tips and tools that focus on enhancing teacher effectiveness. Gleaned from years of observing outstanding teachers in some of the highest-performing urban districts in the country, Lemov provides a how-to manual for the classroom with practical tools that are noticeably absent from the majority of professional development strategies and education school curriculums.

Lemov is currently a managing director at Uncommon Schools. He is the founder of School Performance, and he is a founder and former principal of the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School in Boston. Lemov has also served as the vice president for accountability at the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute, where he designed and implemented a rigorous school accountability system. He holds a B.A. from Hamilton College, an M.A. from Indiana University, and an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School.

In this edited interview, Nicholas P. Morgan, DMC's managing director, talks with Lemov about *Teach Like a Champion,* and about recruiting, teacher training and coaching, enhancing teacher effectiveness, and creating a culture that promotes constant improvement and focuses on increasing student achievement.

There have been many books on great teaching, but *Teach Like A Champion* has distinguished itself. What makes your book different? What inspired you to write this?

I think one of the things that makes the book different is that I started with teachers and not with theory. I'm a really concrete person; my wife would say I'm too concrete. As a teacher, I remember going to training designed to make me better. People would tell me inspirational things that would put me back in touch with why I became a teacher, but when I returned to school the following day, I found that the training wasn't effective in helping me solve the real problems I faced in the classroom.

It's a chronic refrain I hear from teachers: "The training didn't teach me how to handle the things that get in the way of my increasing student achievement." So we tried to start identifying what works and what doesn't. I've always been skeptical of some of the theories I hear people talk about, so I kept asking myself how we could identify what is right and what is wrong. I did what I learned to do when you are confronted with a problem as an MBA, which is you start with the data. I went out and tried to find the best teachers, the people who were actually doing it. I watched what they actually did and learned from what they did. I focused on what these teachers were doing as opposed to what theory says they should be doing, and even what the teachers themselves said they were doing. Some of the best teachers were not able to describe to me what they were doing. But, they did amazing things. ▷

Timothy Raab

I just love teachers. They are incredible, entrepreneurial problem-solvers, and I wanted to honor what they do to solve problems by learning from it. That said, the only thing that I know for sure about this book, and the only thing that anyone knows for sure about any book that they write, is that it's wrong. Some part of it is wrong. I don't know which parts yet, and whether they're big parts or little parts, but clearly, some parts of it are wrong for some teachers, in some settings, at some times. So, one of the things that I tried to stress in the book is the discretionary application of these tools. An effective tool at the wrong time is not the right tool.

You've talked a lot about the implementation gap. Can you describe that a bit for our readers?

What I mean by the implementation gap is the big gap between 'I get it' and 'I can do it.' The first time we tried training with video, we showed it to teachers and they said, "I get it! So inspirational! Yes, I see! Now I know what I'm going to do!" They left the workshop full of optimism, but when we checked back in with them later, they said, "I'm not able to do it yet. It's harder than I thought."

Closing that gap is all about practice. So, let me tell you a quick story. I was really honored that the principal of my kids' school read the book and said, "I want to talk about possibly trying to use this in our school." She asked me how we use it. I told her our teachers at Uncommon Schools report three weeks before school starts, and we have lots of practice sessions. During the school year, we dismiss our students at one o'clock on Fridays, and we have two hours of practice for all teachers. She said, "My teachers report one day before the kids come back."

In most schools there's no time to practice. That tells you that we assume that practice isn't really relevant to the job of teaching. And even beyond that, *team* practice—making the refining of technique a team sport like you would if you were a musician or an athlete—is the key. Unfortunately, if you ask most schools how often their teachers practice the things they do before they go into the game, the answer is zero.

The video clips are terrific. The focus on execution makes this so powerful.

I think the videos speak louder than my words do. The videos show that it can be done. That eliminates a lot of potential excuses that can arise. For example, if I stood up in front of a room of teachers and said, "Here's what you should do: you should call on a kid, and when he can't answer it, you should go to another kid, and then come back to the first kid and say, 'now you tell me.'" A lot of teachers would say that the kid would be chastened by that, and it would be a negative experience for him. But, when I show you a video of a teacher doing that, you see that the kid is proud and sings out the answer. It dispels a lot of the barriers to implementation. And, I think it has shown me that video is a critical piece of teacher training going forward because it carries so much information, and because people learn primarily by modeling.

I also like the videos because I think it is important to shine a light on great teachers. Organizationally, if I'm a district and I want to make my best people feel important and want to hold on to them, I want to show how great they are and have them know that I do everything I can to honor their work. I don't think that teaching as a profession has a problem attracting people. I think it has a problem keeping people, and specifically, keeping its best people. As we know, urban districts have a big problem keeping their best people.

Absolutely, retention is a big issue. We would like to get your thoughts on the gamut of issues that go into enhancing teacher effectiveness, from recruitment and professional development to retention. But first, let's take a step back and talk about your approach to recruitment, which I think our readers would find very interesting.

In the process of writing the book, I realized that the fundamental premise is that teaching is about technique, and that you develop teachers by practicing. That seems like a really simple idea, but it actually pervades every aspect of what we do.

When I started doing this work, many schools that I worked with hired people based on interviews. At Uncommon Schools, we quickly realized that we needed to hire people based on watching them teach a sample lesson. The people who could talk about education were not necessarily the people who could do it in the classroom. But then, we actually took it a step further. We realized that what was most important was to hire teachers who were going to be on the learning curve. So, after the sample lesson, we did a debrief where we gave them positive feedback and constructive feedback, no matter how good or how weak they were. We realized that the way they responded to that feedback was critical. Were they people who were hungry to learn?

We took this process even a step further and invited these teachers to come back and reteach the sample lesson, incorporating the feedback that we had given them. And, let me tell you, if I have a young person who is hungry to learn and takes feedback non-defensively and then puts it into practice in the next lesson, I'll take that person. I may even take that person over a teacher who starts out more proficient. What we are really after is a culture of restless, relentless self-betterment. We want our teachers to want to get better all the time.

Providing feedback on a regular basis and practicing the craft of teaching is central to your professional development for teachers and to your getting the results you do. Clearly, the hiring process you described helps create a group positively disposed to this process, but how else do you embed this in the culture?

It's important to frame the concept correctly. It's critical that teachers understand that I give you feedback not because I don't respect you, but because I think you're worth the time. In fact, the better you are, the more likely I am to give you constructive feedback.

People think buy-in is a prerequisite. But, my colleague Paul Bambrick always says, "Buy-in is a result, not a precondition, for an operating system." When your operating system makes people better, solves their problems, and makes them more successful, then they will believe in it, even if they don't believe in it at first. So, don't wait for them to say, "Yes, I want you to come to my classroom." Go to their classroom, help them get better, be constructive, and then they'll love it.

One of the most interesting negative comments about the book was a post in response to the article about the book in *The New York Times*. The comment read, "I've been a teacher supervisor in a district for 20 years, and in the picture, Doug Lemov is standing in the back of a teacher's classroom taking notes, and every teacher supervisor knows … what an aggressive, threatening thing that is to do, and every teacher in the country would be offended by that." That was ironic to me, because in the picture to which he was referring, I am standing in Katie Bellucci's classroom. She is so successful, and we have such a trusting relationship; she *wants* me and Paul Powell, the principal of Troy Prep, at the back of her classroom. It makes her happy because she knows that we're there to help her, to help her improve, and to help answer her questions. Because Katie wants to be great. It's overwhelmingly sad that an administrator would assume that there's a relationship of mistrust. ▷

> "In the process of writing the book, I realized that the fundamental premise is that teaching is about technique, and that you develop teachers by practicing. That seems like a really simple idea, but it actually pervades every aspect of what we do."

It sounds like you've taken what is often an antagonistic relationship and turned it into a very positive one, so that it is a very different dynamic overall.

People are sometimes afraid of data, but the truth is that data sets you free. Katie knows that she has got to deliver results on the math test, and her kids have to be great math students—the data has to show that. That objectivity is actually a gift to teachers. And my job is to help Katie get there as opposed to saying, "We have met. I approve of the work you have done, Katie." Katie wouldn't know what to make of that comment.

We have an open-door policy in our classrooms. Our teachers and our students don't even look up when someone walks into the back of a classroom because it's so normal. The idea of making an appointment for six weeks from now to visit a classroom seems absurd. It not only gives you a skewed sense of what people are actually doing in the classroom, but, more importantly, it doesn't help teachers get better. At Uncommon, and at most of the top performing systems I know, we've fundamentally turned that dynamic on its head. If your principal isn't someone you trust to help you, something is wrong with the organization.

So, how does this feedback process actually work?

Our rule of thumb is to observe every teacher for about ten minutes every two weeks. I think most people can process two pieces of good news and two pieces of bad news. When we have multiple administrators observing, we coordinate what we think the teacher's most important issues are—positive and negative—so we're not giving them 37 different pieces of feedback. We want to be really consistent and communicate, "These are the two things that you need to be working on." We try and come back and give them feedback about the thing we talked about previously: "This is going well. You're doing much better. This is still kind of an issue. Let's keep working on it. Try this."

Many districts struggle with how to crack the existing culture of not giving feedback. Basically, everyone is used to getting graded a certain way. So, when we start giving more constructive feedback, that is a shock to the system. Any recommendations?

I know this is a challenge, but I would say, start with an opt-in model. If I wanted to do this training in a district where there was a history of ineffective training or resistance between teachers and administration or other barriers, I would just start with an opt-in approach—if you want this, come. The principal of my children's school said, "My most successful teachers are probably going to be the ones who want it first." The best teachers are the ones who are constantly thinking about improving. And then she added, "They're going to start talking about it—'Wow, this is really working well for me'—and then the other teachers are going to start saying, 'How come I can't get that?'"

There's going to be some buzz, and then people will ask to be involved, and you can say, "Great, you can be involved." You don't want to ram it down the throats of people who don't want it. The trick, as my kids' principal rightly observed, is to make people want it.

The feedback and coaching are great as a form of professional development. But, how do you define teacher effectiveness? How do you measure it?

The measure of great teaching is student achievement. Much of that, but not all of that, can be measured by assessments. I'm pretty unapologetic about assessments. At Uncommon Schools, we tell our teachers they need to go above and beyond the assessments. We're college prep, not test prep, and that's a big difference. But, there are no kids who are prepared for college who can't pass those tests; they are necessary but not sufficient. So, we're going to nail them, and after we nail them, we're going to talk about what's next. But, as we all know, there are thousands and thousands of kids who can't come anywhere near passing those tests. So, I believe that you have to start with measurable results and then, hopefully, our measures will get stronger and stronger and stronger.

DMC's Nick Morgan (left) and Doug Lemov (right).

Fundamentally, I think a great teacher is data-driven. They don't ask themselves, "Did I teach it?"; they ask themselves, "Did the students learn it?" At the end of the book, I talk about Ben Marcovitz and his teachers at Sci Academy in New Orleans, which is roundly praised as one of the best public schools in the country. He tells his teachers, "You're not accountable for using the techniques in *Teach Like A Champion*. *Teach Like A Champion* is a tool to get you results. And if you're getting results without it, fine. And if you're using it, but you're not getting results, we still have a problem." My biggest anxiety about the book is that it's very easy for an idea about how to do something to replace the goal. The goal has got to be student achievement. I feel that very strongly.

In summary, to me, a great teacher takes kids through a three-stage process of 'behave, believe, achieve.' First, the bottoms have to be in seats. It doesn't matter what kinds of questions you're asking if the kids own the classroom. The classroom is not a democracy; it's a very enlightened dictatorship, but a lot of teachers aren't comfortable with that. Once the kids behave, it's about getting them to change their relationship to school and to 'believe' in what they're doing. The next stage is getting them to 'achieve,' which means challenging students with rigorous academics that push them to go as far as they can go. I think of managing this process, and it's not easy. As principals, you walk through the building, and you can evaluate the first two of those very easily, on sight: "That is a classroom where the kids' bottoms are in seats and where I see teaching going on, and therefore, I'm happy with that teacher." But, the 'achieve' part of the equation is harder to assess. It's really easy to get a false positive and miss that if you're not attentive to each of those three stages in the progression.

Data-driven assessments always make people fear the end-of-year, high-stakes data.

We got our data late this year. But, I would say that in most cases, we know which teachers are weak and which teachers are strong because we have other forms of data. While data and results are important, teamwork and being committed to the learning curve are critical. If a teacher struggles in their first year performance-wise, but fits our culture and is working hard to improve, I am inclined to keep working with that teacher. For example, managing an orderly classroom is ▷

important to our culture. When you've got one disorderly classroom, it's a tax on every other classroom because kids learn that they can get away with things that then affect other classrooms. So, as long as they're not eroding the school culture for other teachers, I often say,"Let's see how your data goes. I'm concerned about some things, but I expect to see a big second-year bounce."

> "What we are really after is a culture of restless, relentless self-betterment. We want our teachers to want to get better all the time."

But, if they're not learning, and not receptive to feedback, and they are not in line with our culture, I'm probably going to cut bait at the end of the year, possibly even before I've seen their data.

If you have to make a tough decision at the end of the year not to renew someone's contract, it sounds like it shouldn't be a shock to them. You've had a series of conversations that have led to that point.

Absolutely. I think that's critical. I think you want to ask yourself, "Have we as an organization done everything we can to give this person a chance to succeed?" And then, it comes down to the kids. I don't want to be reckless in talking about people's careers, but the purpose of the organization is children's education, not the employment of adults. I appreciate the hard work the teacher did, but if we didn't get there, I need to put someone else in the game and give them a chance to take the ball forward for the sake of the students.

And what about the upper end of the performance curve?

In too many organizations, the reward for being good is you get ignored, and the organization no longer invests in you. Organizations end up losing their best people for this reason. At Uncommon, we talk about this with our principals all the time. You pour all of your resources—supervision, development—into your weakest teachers, and at the end of the year, they're the people who are most likely to leave. It's more productive to be investing in the second quartile or top quartile. I hope that this book gives people a roadmap of things they can talk about with their good and great teachers to not only make them better, but to make them love the job and love the process of constantly getting better.

A lot of your book focused on what I'd call the mechanics of teaching, which are inherently scalable and replicable. That's very compelling.

The interesting thing is that the training, in fact, gets better as there are more people in the room. The training is okay with three people in the room, but with 15 teachers in the room, master teachers as well as struggling teachers, it's great because then you hear master teachers watching your video and talking about your lesson plan and saying, "Here's how I would adapt that. Here's when I'd use that. Here's when I wouldn't." In some ways, there are economies of scale in that you hear multiple versions of adaptation, which normalizes the notion of trying it a different way. And, you hear other people saying, "I do it, and I win." It not only eliminates the potential excuses, but opens the door to a range of possibilities. It's also great for teachers to talk about the problems that plague their day and try to solve them with their peers. It transforms it from a lonely job—a job where you're running your own store in the shopping mall and no one ever sees you—to a team sport, which people like. It makes them happier in the work.

I want to shift gears a bit. Many of our readers are focused on how to run a system better. They are thinking about what kind of system-wide practices can be put in place and what kind of support is needed. What kind of recommendations do you have based on your interaction with districts as to where the big opportunities are for improvement?

This is obvious to all of us, but when you look at the budget of a school system, it's 80% people. You could get 50% better at some other item in your budget, but it won't have much of an impact. It's really all about cultivating people. So, the first thing that I want to do is I want to build a culture. And I think that has to mean getting people together. One thing I think about all the time, and it's going to sound like an obscure analogy, is the success of microfinance, which has revolutionized capital in the third world and in poor economies. People routinely repay their loans at a rate far higher than any purely financial model would predict. The reason that microfinance is so powerful is people feel accountable to their peers; the fact is that ultimately people feel more accountable to their peers than to authority. So yes, people have to be accountable to authority, but I also want to put them in positions where they're explicitly accountable to their peers. So, if I were a superintendent, I would want to get all my principals together and have them decide, "What are the three most important things we need to work on? What are we going to hold each other accountable for?" Then, whenever we get together, or whenever I talk to you or email you, we're going to focus on how we are doing on these three things. I want to try to make it like a team sport.

One of the smartest principals I know, North Star Academy's Julie Jackson, had her teachers choose from a list of six techniques the three things they wanted to do first. She told them to list them out, hold each other accountable, and just focus on getting those three things down. I think you can extrapolate that idea to the district level. I want people to work together in a culture; I want them to have a shared vocabulary. I want them to use their shared vocabulary so that they use it in peer-to-peer interactions when I'm not there. And I want them to call their shots together and say, "Here's what our shared purpose is."

Something else really important in what you just said is the idea of taking long lists and breaking them down to short ones. Prioritization and getting things done is a big challenge when districts have such a long list of things they need to address.

Doing fewer things better is our approach. Also, I think there's so much to learn about training people and about developing organizations from what we do on the front lines. I find that one of the most powerful tools is scope and sequence. For example, if I have twelve things I want to get done this year, it's far better to break that down and say, for example, "For the first six weeks, these are our two issues, and we're not going to move on to the next two issues until we feel like we've mastered the first two. We're going to attack these two by two together, and we're going to hold each other accountable, and we're going to come back and talk about it."

I think that adults develop a lot like kids do. Just as we teach kids a concept and then come back to the same topic later to reinforce it, we can't just do a drive-by training or a drive-by meeting where you talk about an issue and then expect follow-through. You have to come back to it over and over and over again. You ask people to report back, and you say in a way that's non-judgmental that lets them struggle forward, "How's it going? What are the issues you're facing, and what are the challenges? How can we talk through the challenges you're facing?"

I really believe in Jim Collins' adage that you punish sins, but you forgive mistakes. You want people to be comfortable sharing their mistakes so that they and their peers can learn from them, and we can make everybody better. That's kind of how I've been imagining building a district infrastructure. ▷

I love the notion of a CompStat meeting. I come in. I share the data. We identify what we think the solutions are together. The people on the front lines are more likely to know the solutions than the people who are a step removed from the front line. We buy into our strategy together. We come back, repeatedly look at the data and how we're doing, talk about our struggles and our successes equally, hold each other mutually accountable for it—it's a shared goal—and follow that cycle down until we've won, and then we do it again, and then we practice. Then, what we're really practicing is solving problems as a team.

> "I want people to work together in a culture; I want them to have a shared vocabulary. I want them to use their shared vocabulary so that they use it in peer-to-peer interactions when I'm not there. And I want them to call their shots together and say, 'Here's what our shared purpose is.'"

I'd be remiss without asking one last question, which is on the union issue. With regard to collective bargaining agreements, are there any key things that should be non-negotiables for a district in terms of teacher effectiveness? Or, what kind of things would you really want to see in an ideal world?

I don't want a good teacher to have to spend their life indistinguishable from their least competent peer.

I think the issues that would concern me most are those that interfere with information flow. I feel like opening the information flow so you can earn the trust of people by giving them useful feedback and making them better is really critical.

Even if your hands are tied from a bargaining agreement, one of the most powerful tools you have is the power of creating a positive culture. So, I'm thinking about what happened in Los Angeles with the publication of the value-added scores. If that's me and I have that data, I'm not going to publish everyone's value-added, but I want to say, "Here's the top 10%." Stress the positive and say, "Here are the 10% of teachers in the district who have done incredible work this year." I think everyone wants to be honored and respected in the building by their peers, and everyone wants to be on that list. I think that's going to make a bigger difference than calling out the bottom 10%.

Right. That recognition that you're talking about for your top performers is a powerful motivator.

I would love to be able to pay people differently, but I think we often miss the opportunity to reward people with non-financial compensation. There probably are collective bargaining structures that prevent you from giving people positive non-financial compensation, but it seems like an easy case to make to the union to say, "I want to be able to honor our best teachers and put video up and let the newspapers know so everyone in the city can see what great teachers they are." Then, I've created that positive capital for teachers and instructors.

Thank you, Doug, and congratulations. The concrete techniques and the scalability of the training is exciting.

NICHOLAS P. MORGAN IS MANAGING DIRECTOR AT THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT NMORGAN@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.

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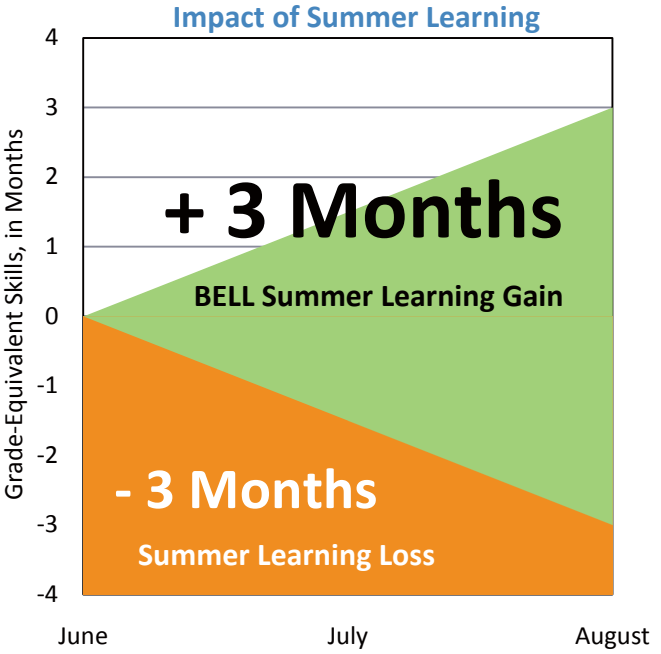
In partnership with schools and districts, BELL seeks to transform the academic achievements, self-confidence, and life opportunities of children in under-resourced, urban communities. Partners provide public funding, teachers, and school facilities, while BELL generates philanthropic support and delivers its program models. Results include:

- ✓ **Greater Outcomes for Scholars:** BELL scholars gain at least 3 months' grade-equivalent literacy and math skills in BELL's scientifically-proven summer program, when most students lose 3 months' skills to summer learning loss. Scholars outpace national norms in acquiring new academic and social skills after school.
- ✓ **Turn Around Low-Performing Schools:** BELL delivers educational opportunities to the students and schools that need them most and aligns its work to district reform strategies.
- ✓ **Create Jobs & Professional Development:** We hire outstanding educators to lead academic instruction, college students to serve as mentors, and delivers award-winning training and professional development.
- ✓ **Increased Program Dosage & Quality:** By leveraging public funding with private contributions, BELL delivers more hours of higher-quality programming.
- ✓ **Capacity to Execute:** BELL manages all elements of program planning and service delivery.
- ✓ **Sustainability:** Programs can be sustained through a combination of Title I, and summer school funding, as well as philanthropic contributions.
- ✓ **Evaluation & Accountability:** BELL rigorously measures scholar outcomes and shares data with parents, schools, and districts.

Partner With Us: Please contact Carole Prest, Chief Strategy Officer, to learn more about partnership opportunities.

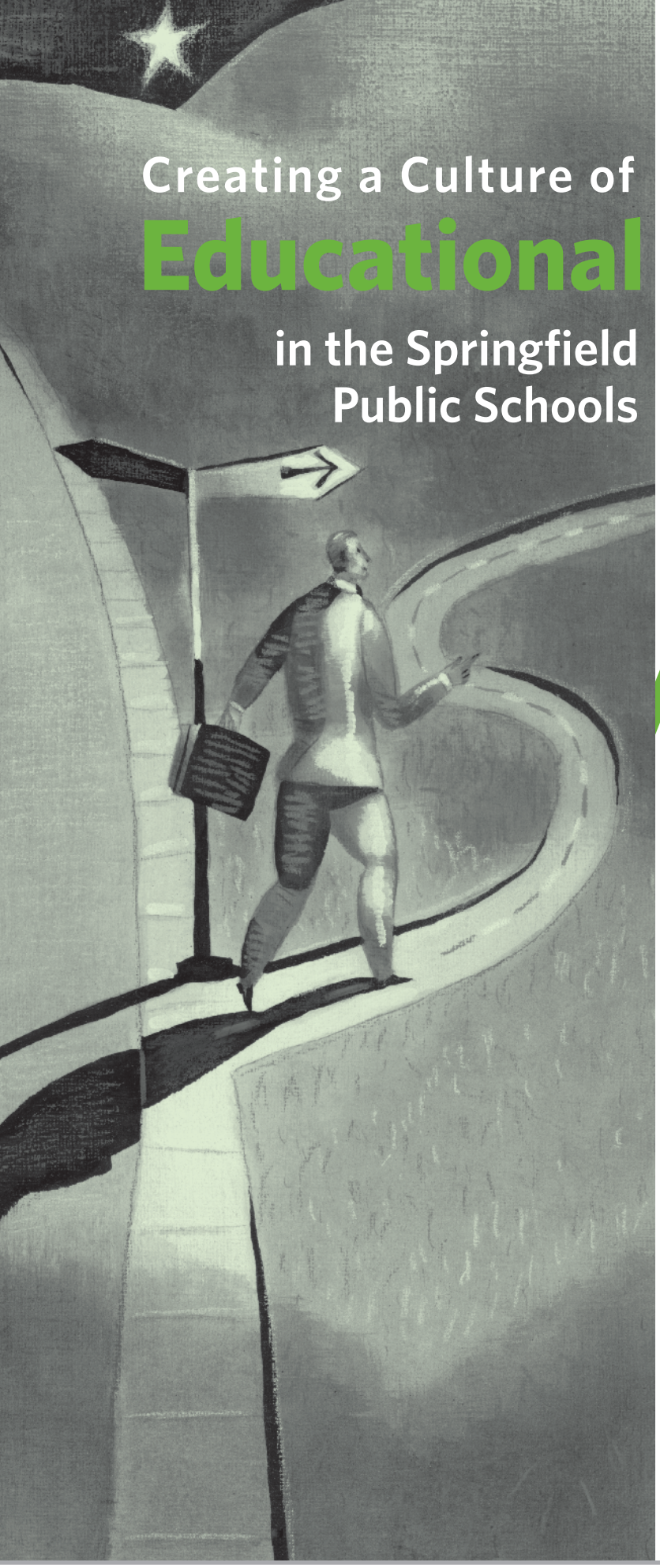
cprest@experiencebell.org



About BELL

Founded in 1992, BELL is a national nonprofit that delivers educational summer and after school programs for 10,000 children in grades K-8. BELL has partnered with districts and schools in Augusta, Baltimore, Boston, Charlotte, Detroit, Flint, New York City, and Springfield to increase student engagement and performance.

The organization's program models pair academic intervention in literacy and math with hands-on enrichment activities, mentoring, family engagement, and community service. The BELL Summer model is one of few with strong evidence of effectiveness, and the only one proven in multiple cities and states.



Creating a Culture of Educational Excellence in the Springfield Public Schools

| ALAN INGRAM

As Winston Churchill famously said, "The price of greatness is responsibility." I know that the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) can be as great as we want them to be if we all take responsibility for achieving that greatness. With that responsibility in mind, the pockets of success we enjoy in Springfield are simply not sufficient. We need to take responsibility to allow all children to reach their full potential, supported by a climate and culture that can enable success. This sense of purpose has helped us direct Springfield toward a future that incorporates honest self-reflection and informed, continuous improvement.

In July 2008, I was honored to be appointed superintendent of Springfield Public Schools, a school district with a rich tradition of being a driving force for good in the community. However, through a series of forums—key informational interviews with the School Committee, collective bargaining groups, teachers, parents, and other members of the community, it became clear that Springfield Public Schools needed a mandate for change. The beginning of my tenure presented an excellent opportunity to move forward in a new direction.

It was essential that we make the district a better education system; to do this we would have to focus on sharply improving academic achievement across the district, making schools safer, building a strong coalition of community support for public schools, and creating a culture of high expectations throughout the district. The plain truth is that Springfield Public Schools have too many students dropping out before they graduate, too few students

attending class every day, and too few students achieving at high levels in the classroom.

In these two and a half years, we have made progress toward our vision to create a culture of educational excellence. To claim victory at this point would be foolish, as much more needs to be done. However, there is no question that the public schools of Springfield are in a much stronger position today than they were in the summer of 2008. This is thanks to many people in Springfield—the work of the School Committee, our teachers and administrators, the willingness of the public, and the dedicated employees of SPS who have embraced the change-focused initiatives that are so desperately needed here.

Getting Ready for Change

The organizational process that I began in Springfield has been very structured and draws upon some popular organizational frameworks; however, it has been the underlying themes and values of the tools we used that have been the most valuable aspects of our change management process. The various measures and concepts in the tools we used can be a part of any district's transformation process. I often reflect on a comment from Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison, both past presidents of the National Staff Development Council. Their words explain the way we think about transforming our district: "Organizational development requires a planned approach to change based on meeting the needs of both the people and the organization." From the outset of my tenure, beginning with my entry plan, I have continually tried to focus my attention on Springfield's needs.

My original entry plan provided a framework and structure that guided my transition into the superintendency. An important first step that I took was learning more about the district from the community. This included establishing listening posts, clarifying the needs of the school district, identifying improvement opportunities, and targeting any threat that might adversely affect the learning community. By gathering critical information quickly about the needs of the children, teachers, the school system, and the community, I was able to assess the district's strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. This allowed me to develop a strategic focus for our initial direction. My plan included five high-priority reforms:

1. **Aligned Learning Communities:** We chose to divide the district into three regional zones. This was done to help teachers and administrators better focus on the needs of students and staff in each area of the district, and increase staff capacity to offer tailored support services.
2. **Instructional Leadership Specialists (ILS):** We created "lead teacher" positions. Lead teachers provide specific support for teachers in the core content areas at our lowest performing schools.

Dr. Alan Ingram, Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools.

3. **Organizational Health Improvement Process (OHI):** We engaged the Organizational Health Diagnostic and Development Corporation to assess and help cultivate the overall well-being of the district.
4. **High Performance Model:** We implemented this strategic planning process to support district-wide strategic planning activities and continuous quality improvement.
5. **Harris Poll Interactive School Survey:** We administer this survey biannually to gather information about experiences and satisfaction levels of a variety of stakeholders in the district. ▷

We believe that the Springfield Public Schools must be driven by our mandate for change and our vision of educational achievement, and we have derived our initiatives based on key concepts and best practices in organizational improvement. I will elaborate on the high performance model and the organizational health frameworks because of the way they have helped us begin the change process in our district.

The High Performance Model that we instituted has been an important part of our organizational growth. This model is based on the nationally recognized Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Criteria, and is designed for educational institutions. It requires that our core focal points —leadership, values, customer service, systemic processes—serve to promote performance excellence and continuous improvement.

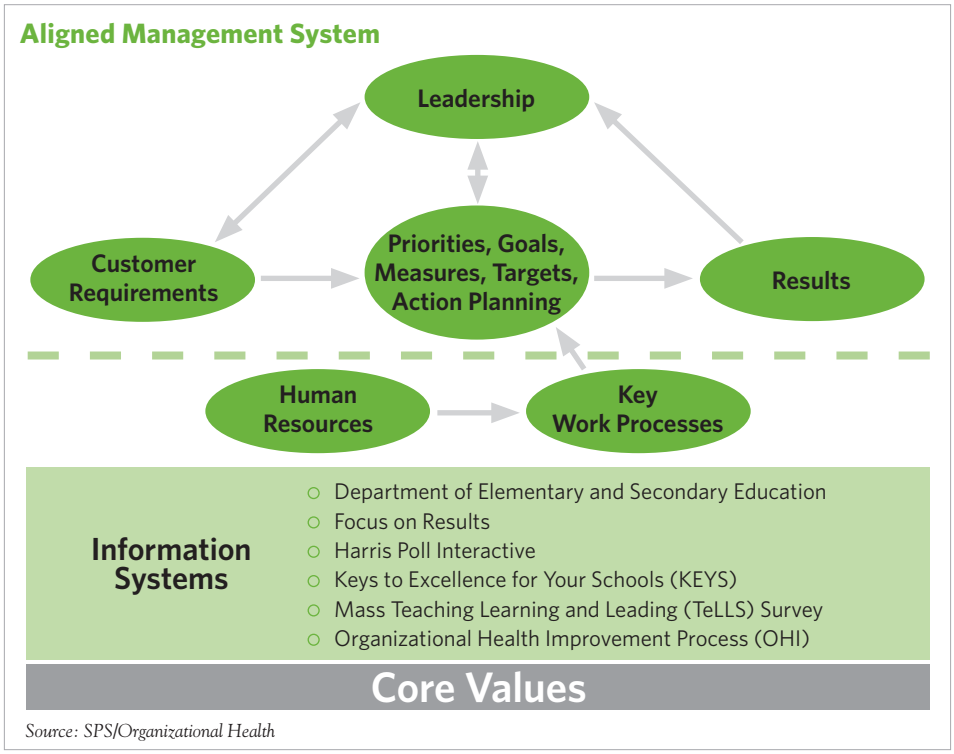
Further, a critical tool within the High Performance Model is the Aligned Management System (AMS) (Figure 1). AMS is a framework that places our focus on resource-conscious alignment within our district. The framework illustrates the logical relationship that exists among all the elements of a school system. AMS provides crucial, on-going monitoring and assessment of the district's processes and capabilities. By using a tool that gives us such a clear vision of ourselves, Springfield Public Schools continues to build a knowledge base about its needs for the future. Additionally, this tool provides the structure and support for on-going decision-making processes that must occur to keep the district focused on its path to success.

All factors are necessary and interconnected. However, the foundation for the process of transformation must be an infrastructure that, where appropriate, empowers decision-making, creates cohesion, grants autonomy, and provides quality assurance. Building this architecture for transformation is a process called Organizational Health Improvement. To assist us with this, we engaged the Organizational Health Diagnostic and Development Corporation (Organizational Health).

Focus on Organizational Health & Culture

The Organizational Health Improvement Process —another critical tool in our organizational development—has embedded in it several important change management concepts. This process is a data-based approach for diagnosing and improving the effectiveness of leadership teams. The main objective is to increase student achievement by focusing on increasing leadership capacity to improve student performance in both central office units and campuses throughout the district. We adopted this particular approach because it includes a proven data-based system and processes for helping leaders accept responsibility for effectiveness. The Council of Chief State School Officers highlighted the Organizational Health diagnostic and development process in their Successful Practices Series in 2004. We felt it was important to use a tool that was both aligned with our mission and values, and had a successful record of practice.

FIGURE 1



Source: SPS/Organizational Health

I placed the Organizational Health Improvement Process at the base of the Information Systems within our management system because it established a solid foundation for our transformation by providing the following key supports:

- **The infrastructure for the transformational process.** This infrastructure included Leadership Belief Statements, which provided the parameters for some important decision-making activities. These decision-making activities included achieving quality decisions, making decisions at the most appropriate level, empowering individuals and teams appropriately, creating cohesive interdependent teams, granting autonomy appropriately, and providing quality assurance and control systems.
- **A proven data-based system and multiple processes for helping key leaders accept responsibility and accountability.** The Organizational Health Improvement Process highlighted key leaders' responsibilities for organizational health as well as for school and central office effectiveness.
- **A conceptual framework for identifying where schools and central office units were on a dependence continuum.** We were able to use our series of improvement tools to identify where different parts of the organization were on a spectrum, from dependence all the way to interdependence. Through this type of model, teams can see and devise strategies to move individuals and teams from dependence to independence, and from independence to interdependence.

The Organizational Health Process Step-by-Step

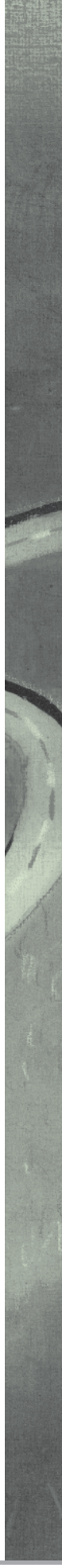
A significant part of the transformation process for Springfield has occurred as a result of our decision to follow the Organizational Health Improvement (OHI) framework, with the assistance of outside consultants. For us, it has been important to have a structured, step-by-step process. Discussing the particular steps of our organizational health diagnostic and improvement sheds some light on the important themes that underlie our plan of action.

First in the process was a district-wide orientation session for key leaders, including principals and central office staff. It was important that these leaders be directly engaged in the district strategy, so that they could understand our aims to improve, see how they would fit into the process, and have a chance to become more aware of the whole process itself. In step two, we collected organizational health data to analyze. Next, we developed a composite Organizational Health Profile for both campuses and central office units. The analysis allowed us to identify leadership and organizational strengths as well as improvement priorities for the district. While these steps were particular to the framework we chose, they are important components of any change-driven set of initiatives because of the focus on leader buy-in and the use of data as a key resource.

For us, steps four and five were highly individualized data-based activities requiring the involvement of each leader, his/her supervisor, and an Organizational Health consultant. Step five involved collaboratively developing a plan for each particular leader. Once each individual plan was developed, each leader was tasked with sharing the data with faculty and/or the central office team to which they belonged. This led to the next step, team training sessions. These were focused on building the capacity of leaders and key members of their teams. The final step in our process was focused on incorporating the district's strategic plan into each school's goal-setting and planning process. We think that the model we used employed an important natural progression, from communication to data collection to planning to team training, and finally, to broad implementation.

The major benefit of the entire process has been the way it elicits open and honest feedback regarding the internal workings of schools and central office units. Briefly stated, OHI provides a reliable and valid measurement of ten dimensions of organizational health.

These ten dimensions yield a composite profile of organizational health, which is defined as "an organization's ability to function effectively, to cope adequately, to change appropriately, and to grow within." This health, like personal health, can vary from a minimal to a maximal degree. ▷



Status Report: What Did the Data Reveal in December 2008?

Through our data collection, it became clear that Adaptation was the dimension that needed the most attention for our district. The data revealed that Adaptation was a priority for our schools:

- Number one priority for 24 schools,
- Number two priority for 18 schools, and
- Number three priority for 7 schools.

Our analysis allowed us to see that 49 of the 52 schools had adaptation as one of their top three improvement priorities. From previous experience, I knew that adaptation was going to be a crucial dimension for Springfield because of its high correlation with student performance. In order to transform the schools, central office leaders and principals needed to be willing and able to adapt to meet the unique needs and challenges of students throughout the district. It was very helpful to see this knowledge of practice confirmed through our data collection.

It was also clear to me that two additional dimensions of organizational health needed to be in place in order to have a significant impact upon student performance. These dimensions of Cohesiveness and Goal Focus were also important as indicated by our data collection and analysis process.

The Impact on Student Achievement

Our work and effort needed to result in a measurable impact. Knowing this, we entered the process with the intent of asking and measuring the following: Does the organizational health of schools impact the bottom line student performance? Was this work a good investment of our time and energy? These are crucial questions and questions that needed a data-based response.

The first analysis we conducted required computing a two-year average Composite Performance Index (CPI) score for English and Language Arts (ELA) based on the statewide accountability system.[1] Next, schools were ranked from high to low based upon their two-year ELA-CPI scores. Schools were placed into the following three groups based upon their performance scores:

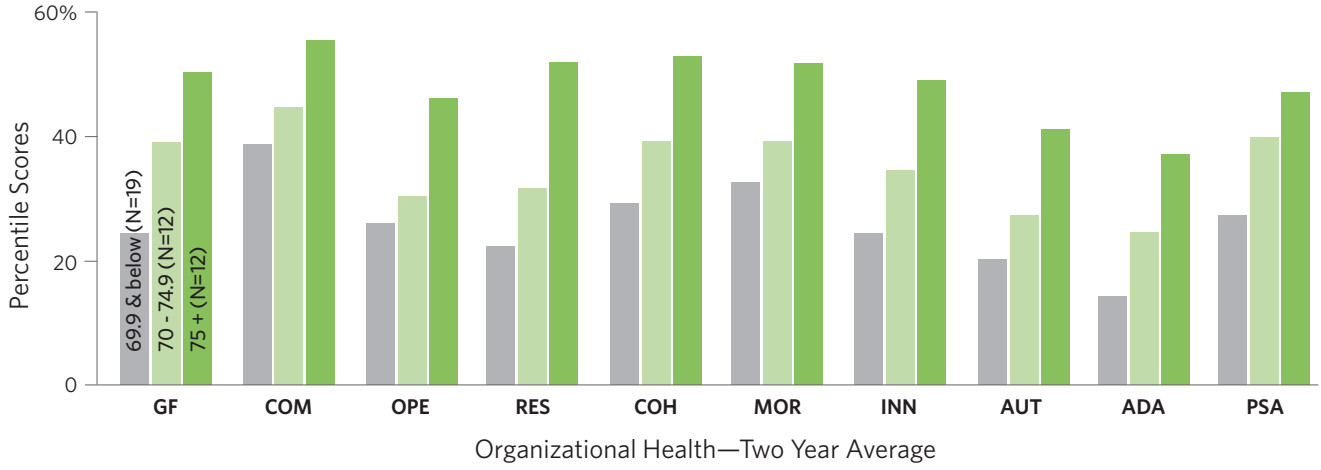
- Above 75 (N = 12)
- Between 70 and 74.9 (N = 12)
- Below 70 (N = 19)

A two-year organizational health score was computed for each school based on the ten dimensions of organizational health and the total score. The composite organizational health percentile scores were computed for each of the three groups of schools. A very clear pattern emerged, demonstrating the relationship between the levels

FIGURE 2

Organizational Health Profile

Springfield Public Schools—ELA/CPI (2008-2009 AVG) (N=43)



Source: SPS/Organizational Health

of student performance and the dimensions of organizational health. For each of the ten dimensions, there is a very clear "stair-step" relationship. These results are shown in Figure 2. For us, this demonstrated relationship between organizational health and student performance has confirmed the importance of using organizational health as a guiding principle as we move forward.

What are the Implications?

It is clear that to have systemic, sustained success in classrooms throughout the district, we must focus on improving the organizational health of each school as well as of the central office. Based upon two years of data, student performance correlated with these "big three" dimensions of organizational health (Goal Focus, Cohesiveness, Adaptation) at the 0.01 level of statistical significance. The prospect of significant improvement in student performance is dismal unless the existing culture can be transformed and modeled along these dimensions.

Based on our data, it seems logical that schools will be more productive when principals have a goal focus for all staff—built-in systems that foster clarity, acceptance, support, and advocacy of school-wide goals and objectives. Schools that are leading the way by having support and focus on school-wide goals enable faculty to devote energy to important activities, such as critically examining data, having healthy professional debates, and being involved in establishing realistic short and long-range goals and objectives.

Further, when principals and other key leaders exemplify cohesiveness by demonstrating that ▷

The 10 Dimensions of Organizational Health

1. **Goal Focus:** Goal Focus (GF) is the ability of persons, groups, or organizations to have clarity, acceptance, support, and advocacy of goals and objectives.
2. **Communication Adequacy:** Communication Adequacy (COM) exists when information is relatively distortion free and travels both vertically and horizontally within the organization.
3. **Optimal Power Equalization:** Optimal Power Equalization (OPE) is the ability to maintain a relatively equitable distribution of influence between leader and team members.
4. **Resource Utilization:** Resource Utilization (RES) is the ability to identify and utilize the human talent effectively within an organization and to do so with a minimal sense of stress.
5. **Cohesiveness:** Cohesiveness (COH) is the state in which persons, groups, or organizations have a clear sense of identity. Members feel attracted to membership in an organization. They want to stay with it, be influenced by it, and exert their own influence within it.
6. **Morale:** Morale (MOR) is that state in which a person, group, or organization has feelings of well-being, satisfaction, and pleasure.
7. **Innovativeness:** Innovativeness (INN) is the ability to be and allow others to be inventive, diverse, creative, and risk taking.
8. **Autonomy:** Autonomy (AUT) is the ability for members to have the freedom to fulfill their roles and responsibilities within established boundaries.
9. **Adaptation:** Adaptation (ADA) is the ability of members to adapt and change to meet the external demands for change without violating their basic beliefs and values.
10. **Problem-Solving Adequacy:** Problem-Solving (PSA) is an organization's ability to perceive problems and solve them with minimal energy. Problems stay solved, and the problem-solving mechanism of the organization is maintained and/or strengthened.

Source: Organizational Health

they value, promote, and expect collaborative team work throughout the school, it has a powerful impact on performance. These leaders tend to have systems in place to help horizontal and vertical teams progress naturally through the stages of team development. Teams analyze causes for gaps, identify discrepancies, predict future trends, plan proactively, hold themselves and others accountable, and work collaboratively with other interdependent teams. When time is at a premium, and with dollars decreasing, and external expectations increasing, educators need to maximize the impact of their time by capitalizing on the synergy within these horizontal and vertical teams.

When performance doesn't match the expectation, the natural response of cohesive, goal focused teams is to adapt. This adaptation will be based upon a critical analysis of existing data, a reexamination of current strategies, and the development of proactive strategies for achieving the desired results. Principals and other key leaders play pivotal roles in this process, especially during the early stages of adaptation.

Is the District Making Progress?

Creating a culture of educational excellence in an urban environment takes time and commitment from the central office, individual schools, and developing leaders.

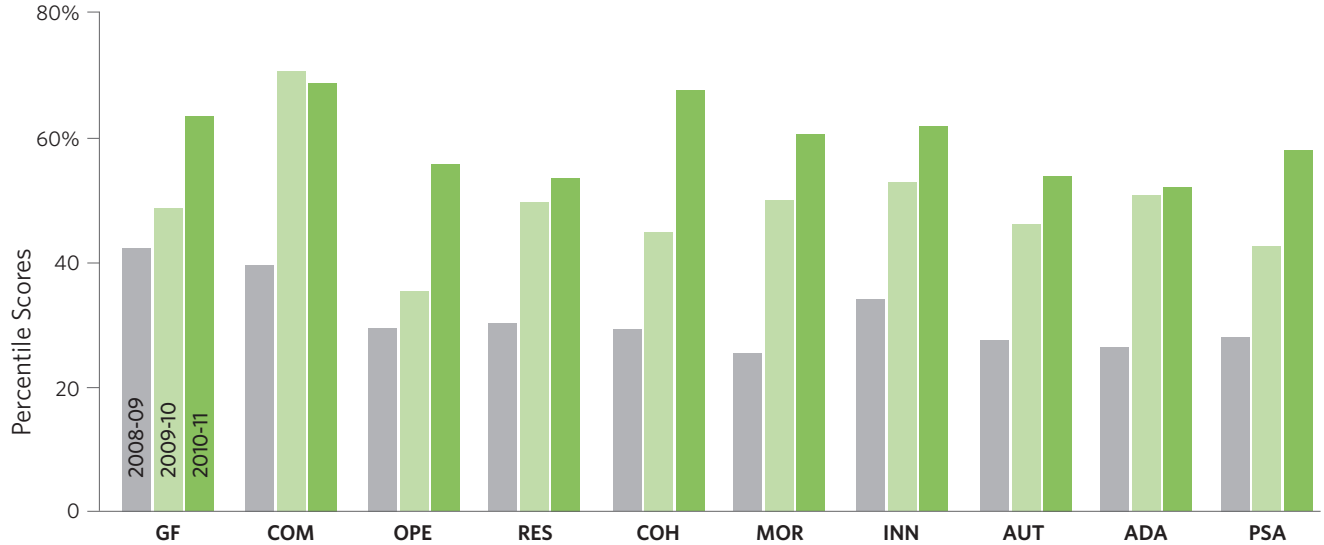
In order to transform a school system, change must start at the top of the organization, and it does take time. The data reveal that progress has been made during each of the past two years, but the rate of change needs to continue and be accelerated (Figure 3). It was gratifying to see that major gains have been made in Goal Focus and Cohesiveness. Additional time and energy must be focused on improving the organizational health and effectiveness of the 15 key central office units as each of these units has an impact upon the organizational health and effectiveness of our 52 school sites.

For the district's 52 sites, the overall scores have improved on eight of the ten dimensions of organizational health. However, Goal Focus, one of the essential dimensions, has decreased. The data suggest that some principals may be having difficulty in articulating the new goals and improvement plans, and possibly in convincing teachers that these new performance targets are achievable. Even though there has been a drop in Goal Focus, 19 schools have been able to increase the levels of Goal Focus during the past year.

Based upon the 2008 data, most principals have made significant structural changes. Many of those changes, however, were not initiated until the fall

FIGURE 3

Organizational Health Profile for 11 Key Central Office Units



Source: SPS/Organizational Health

of 2009, so those changes may have had minimal impact on the 2009 data. Many teachers are still taking a "wait and see" attitude toward these changes. I continue to focus on developing a culture of commitment and buy-in that will drive organizational health improvement.

We believe that our strategy and initiatives must be present throughout the fabric of our organization. As a result, organizational health data has also informed the way we are making personnel decisions. The assistant superintendent for schools and the three chief school officers who supervise, coach, and evaluate principals used organizational health data when selecting and assigning principals to new schools. During the previous year, several natural vacancies occurred, and several principals were encouraged to move to more challenging schools that needed their leadership and organizational skills. The assistant superintendent and his team used organizational health data to help make decisions regarding transfers and the assignment of new principals to schools with vacancies. Their goal was to capitalize on the leadership skills of principals and to place them in positions where their skills would have the greatest overall impact for the district. We have benefitted from being able to incorporate the organizational health data into many different aspects of our district operations.

As a result in this particular example, the organizational health of the 11 schools with principal turnover improved substantially on all ten dimensions. The dimensions of Communication Adequacy, Optimal Power Equalization, Morale, Autonomy, and Problem Solving Adequacy more than doubled during the year.

Using Data to Help Transform the Schools and Central Office Units

The organizational health data for all schools and 15 key central office units collected in 2008 and 2009 has been, and will continue to be, used to help in the transformation process. Some of the specific district-wide changes that were reinforced or initiated as a result of this philosophy and data include the following:

- Restructured the central office
  - Created better alignment with the district's goals that were established though the Strategic Planning Process.
  - Created structures that require departments to function interdependently rather than just within their independent silos.
  - Created structures that provide greater support from central office to schools.
- Incorporated the six Leadership Belief Statements into the day-to-day operations of all schools and central office units. These principle-centered Leadership Belief Statements are designed to help transform schools and central office units from dependence to independence and from independence to interdependence.

> "We believe that our strategy and initiatives must be present throughout the fabric of our organization."

- Created an alignment between the goals and performance targets, the appraisal process, the development process, and the compensation structure.
- Created a framework for selecting and assigning administrators based upon the needs of the administrative unit and the leadership and organizational skills of applicants.
- Provided organizational health training and coaching for leaders and key members of their leadership teams and provided them with conceptual tools for moving their organizations to the next level.
- Created and modeled transparency by "working through" each of the steps in the organizational health improvement process. The superintendent, assistant superintendents, and the chief school officers modeled the data sharing and feedback process with members of their leadership teams. Principals participated in this process as team members two times before they replicated the process with their own faculties. ▷

- Established procedures and guidelines for two key leadership teams at campuses.
  - The Instructional Focus Team became the primary driving force for improving the quality of teaching and learning throughout the campus.
  - The Principal Advisory Council (Operational Team) provided a place for healthy debate and conversations regarding non-instructional issues that could negatively impact the effectiveness of schools. Adding this important committee created another opportunity for collaborative decision-making and for empowering more professionals.

> "My challenge to all faculty and staff this academic year is to harness the tremendous, infectious power of *positive attitude.*"

- Created an expectation that every campus and key central office team would accept full responsibility for improving the organizational health and effectiveness of their administrative units. This would be accomplished by increasing the leadership capacity of individuals and teams throughout their units, resulting in improved student performance.

Concluding Thoughts: Strategy and Practice

My challenge to all faculty and staff this academic year is to harness the tremendous, infectious power of *positive attitude*. There is a quote by an unknown author that says: "Our lives are not determined by what happens to us, but how we react to what happens; not by what life brings to us, but the attitude we bring to life. A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events and outcomes. It is a catalyst … a spark that creates extraordinary results." I believe that through our strategic initiatives and a district-wide desire to see those initiatives realized, we can obtain the kind of results to which we aspire.

As educators, our attitudes should not only show that we believe in our students' aspirations beyond high school, they should also give birth to them. I expect everyone to bring positive attitudes to the classroom, the boardroom, the office, and the playground. I expect we will all model for our students the belief that they can overcome obstacles and become the greatest students they can be. We must let our attitudes demonstrate that we know our children can and will rise to the level of expectation that we set for them.

Using proven and data-driven tools that are aligned with our relentless focus on student achievement has been an extremely valuable direction for this district. It is important that we, as a district, keep a strategic focus on the journey ahead by employing tools that allow us to visualize and measure progress, and, more importantly, that are continually aligned with our core values.

[1] One of the 52 schools was a primary school so it did not have CPI scores, one was a new school so it did not have two years of data, and the eight alternative campuses are considered one school with regards to their CPI scores. Therefore a composite Organizational Health score was computed for these eight schools, thus reducing the number of schools with two years of data to 43 schools.

DR. ALAN INGRAM IS THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS, A DISTRICT SERVING NEARLY 26,000 STUDENTS IN 52 SCHOOL SITES. PREVIOUSLY, DR. INGRAM SERVED AS CHIEF ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICER FOR OKLAHOMA CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS; HE ALSO SERVED THE DISTRICT IN A VARIETY OF OTHER CAPACITIES INCLUDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS. PRIOR TO TRANSITIONING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION, HE SERVED IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE FOR MORE THAN 22 YEARS, WHERE HE ATTAINED THE RANK OF CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT, A RANK TO WHICH ONLY ONE PERCENT OF ENLISTED OFFICERS ASCEND. DR. INGRAM HOLDS A BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND (EUROPEAN DIVISION), A MASTER'S DEGREE FROM WEBSTER UNIVERSITY, AND A DOCTORATE IN EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION, CURRICULUM AND SUPERVISION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA, AND IS A 2007 BROAD SUPERINTENDENTS ACADEMY FELLOW.

The District Management Council

Strategic Advice and Implementation Support

THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL (DMC) is a membership network of public school districts and their leaders that provides superior strategic insights and practical solutions to the most pressing challenges facing school systems. DMC delivers in-depth techniques, tools, and training required to successfully raise student achievement while improving operations and lowering costs.

Since its founding in 2004, DMC has successfully assisted school districts across the country in areas such as strategic planning, human capital management, financial resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement and communications. We draw upon the collective wisdom of our growing membership, the veteran perspectives of our Senior Advisors, and the analytical expertise of our management consultants who have decades of combined experience advising not only public school districts but complex multinational corporations and government agencies.

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District and Community Partners, a division of DMC, is committed to helping school districts improve achievement of students with special needs and balance tight budgets. District and Community Partners is founded on the belief that both are possible, and more importantly, possible at the same time.

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Baltimore County Public Schools, MD
Batavia Public Schools District 101, IL
Bayport-Blue Point Union Free SD, NY
Bloomfield Hills School District, MI
Boston Public Schools, MA
Bradford Area School District, PA
Brighton School District 27J, CO
Brockton Public Schools, MA
Cambridge Public Schools, MA
Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD, TX
Castro Valley Unified School District, CA
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC
Chino Valley USD, CA
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Consolidated School District of New Britain, CT
Cumberland County Schools, NC
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, TX
Dallas ISD, TX
Dallastown Area School District, PA
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Daviess County Public Schools, KY
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Duval County Public Schools, FL
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Ector County ISD, TX
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Fairfax County Public Schools, VA
Falcon School District #49, CO
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Geneseo Community Unit School District 228, IL
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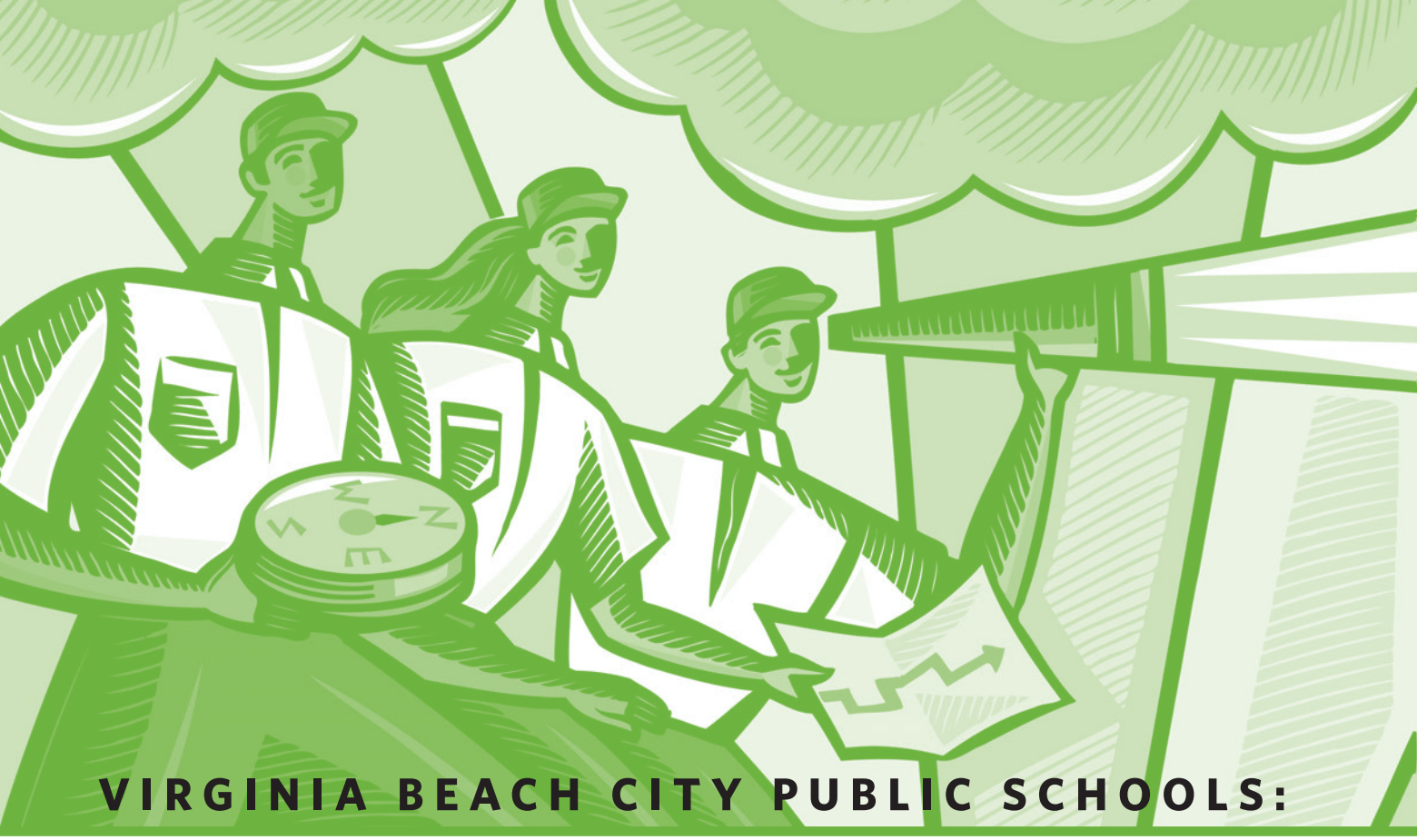
Grandview School District, WA
Hamilton County Public Schools, TN
Hattiesburg Public School District, MS
Hermiston School District 8R, OR
Houston ISD, TX
Howard-Suamico School District, WI
Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD, TX
Independent School District of Boise City, ID
Jackson Local School District, OH
Joint School District #2, ID
Kansas City Missouri School District, MO
Lancaster City School District, OH
Littleton Public Schools, CO
Madison County Public Schools, VA
Madison Metropolitan School District, WI
Madison School District #321, ID
Maine School Admin District No. 60, ME
Manheim Township School District, PA
Mariner, NC
Miami-Dade County Public Schools, FL
Middleton School District #134, ID
Minnetonka Public School District #276, MN
Monroe City Schools, LA
Montclair Public Schools, NJ
Montgomery Public Schools, AL
Moore County Schools, NC
Naperville Community Unit School District 203, IL
New Berlin Public Schools, WI
New Trier Township High School District #203, IL
Newport News Public Schools, VA
Oxford School District, MS
Oxnard School District, CA
Paterson Public Schools, NJ
Pflugerville ISD, TX
Pinellas County Schools, FL,
Plainville Community Schools, CT
Pocono Mountain School District, PA
Portsmouth School Department, RI
Poudre School District, CO
Prince Edward County Public Schools, VA
Prince George's County Public Schools, MD
Radnor Township School District, PA
Region 4 Education Service Center, TX
Richardson ISD, TX
Richmond Community School District, IN
Rio Rancho Public Schools, NM
River Forest School District 90, IL
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan ISD #196, MN
Salem City Schools, VA
San Antonio ISD, TX
School District Of Lancaster, PA
School District of Waukesha, WI
Selah School District 119, WA
Sheldon ISD, TX
Sherwood School District 88J, OR
Simsbury Public Schools, CT,
South San Francisco Unified School District, CA
Spring Branch ISD, TX
Springfield Public Schools, MA
Stamford Public Schools, CT
Swampscott Public Schools, MA
Tucson USD, AZ
Uinta Co School District 1, WY
University of Mississippi, School of Education, MS
Victory Schools, NY
Virginia Beach City Public Schools, VA
Washington County School District, MD
Washington County Schools, MD
Wenatchee School District 246, WA
Westside Community Schools, NE
Wilmette School District #39, IL
Wilson County Schools, NC



VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

A Strategy for the 21st Century

| JAMES G. MERRILL

It's an increasingly popular refrain: our children need skills that include creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving. They will also need to know how to collaborate and communicate effectively. Other life skills such as global awareness and technology literacy are perhaps equally important. Such "21st Century Student Outcomes" are noble, but is it really possible to align an entire (large) school district around such objectives? In Virginia Beach, we are transforming the leadership and management of the district precisely along those lines.

Our strategic plan in the Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS), known as *Compass to 2015: A Strategic Plan for Student Success*, grew out of a School Board Program of Work articulated by the Board in fall 2007. Goal one of the program stipulated that staff and administration would "Develop a new strategic plan that will guide Virginia Beach City Public Schools from 2009-2015." Most importantly, the program grew out of an acknowledgement and sense of urgency that our schools were not adequately preparing graduates for college, work, and citizenship.

Compass to 2015 represents a bold move beyond the minimum competencies of success on state tests. This is its aim:

> *Recognizing that the long range goal of the VBCPS is the successful preparation and graduation of every student, the near term goal is that by 2015, 95 percent or more of VBCPS students will graduate having mastered the skills they need to succeed as 21st-century learners, workers and citizens.*

Notably, our strategic plan is not aimed at success on the Virginia "Standards of Learning" (SOL) state standards. Our aim is to develop students who are critical and creative thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, academically proficient, effective communicators and collaborators, globally aware, and independent and responsible learners and citizens. We know that if we foster that kind of learning, SOL success will assuredly follow. As many might be thinking, this is not easy work to pursue. You need to live in two worlds at once: first, the world of state and federal accountability systems we all operate within, and second, a complementary world of what many of our stakeholders feel matters more than standardized test success. This is, of course, easier to accomplish when you're already successfully meeting state standards.

We have reinvented and re-organized our work toward that end. We have identified the 21st-century skills we believe students must have, and this summer we required all teachers to attend training on how to foster these skills. And, we are changing our assessment system to include more activity and performance-based tasks that help measure those attributes in ways that multiple choice tests cannot.

When we began this work, we had the guidance of Dr. Tony Wagner of the Harvard Change Leadership Group and author of *The Global Achievement Gap*. Dr. Wagner identified the characteristics today's employers are seeking in their employees: critical thinking and problem-solving; collaborating across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination.

As Dr. Wagner notes in *Rigor Redefined*, "To teach and test the skills that our students need, we must first redefine excellent instruction. It is not a checklist of teacher behaviors and a model lesson that covers content standards. It is working with colleagues to ensure that all students master the skills they need to succeed as lifelong learners, workers, and citizens." In Virginia Beach, we are reengineering: moving from a stance of test-taking success to one of cultivation of these skills in children. We have taken real steps to accomplish this, from making changes to assessment to working harder to partner with families.

What began as a straightforward program to create a strategic plan morphed in two years into ▷

Virginia Beach City Public Schools Fast Facts

- **VBCPS Mission**

  The Virginia Beach City Public Schools, in partnership with the entire community, will empower every student to become a life-long learner who is a responsible, productive, and engaged citizen within the global community.

- **VBCPS Vision**

  Every student is achieving at his or her maximum potential in an engaging, inspiring, and challenging learning environment.

- **District Overview**

  Virginia Beach City Public Schools is the largest school division in Hampton Roads—southeastern Virginia—serving approximately 69,500 students in grades K-12. The split is roughly 55.4% Caucasian, 27.1% African American, 6.1% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian, 0.9% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.4% Native American, and 4.2% of Unspecified Ethnicity. The Per Pupil Expenditure is $11,020 for the 2009-10 school year.

  Currently, the school system includes 56 elementary schools, 14 middle schools, 11 high schools, and a number of secondary/post-secondary specialty centers. The district employs over 5,700 teachers.

a division-wide multifaceted campaign of gathering research and community input to determine how VBCPS could best educate our students. Our campaign has included parents, students, teachers, administrators, the military, the business community, faith-based and non-profit organizations, education entities, municipal representatives, and community members at large. We also worked closely with a futurist and nationally known education authors and speakers such as Daniel Pink and Tony Wagner. The result? A forward thinking, even visionary, document that will serve VBCPS as a blueprint for educating its students through 2015. As Joe Burnsworth, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and a 33-year veteran of the district, notes, "I've seen many strategic plans come and go. This is the first I've seen that truly excited people."

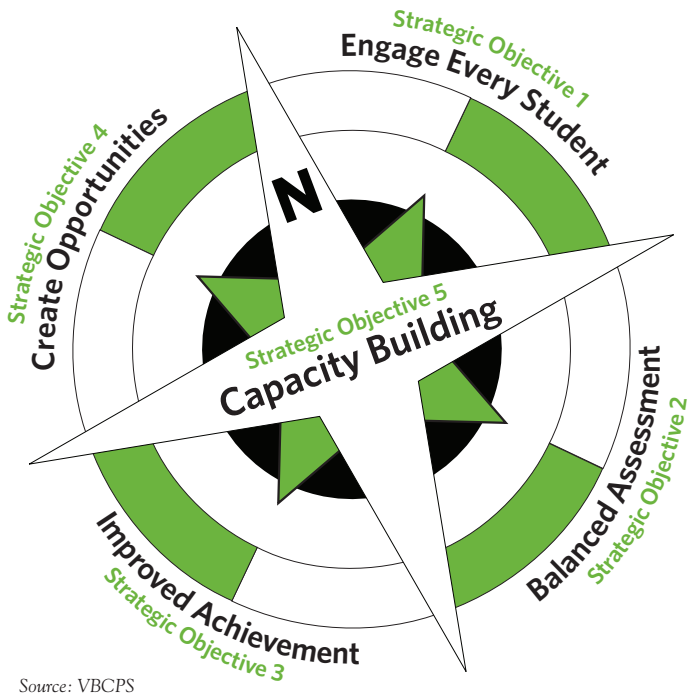
Using Our Strategic Plan as Our Guide

If excitement about a strategic plan is rare, then it's no wonder that in many districts plans gather dust on shelves rather than being used to guide real change. Our strategic plan outlines five key objectives, shown in Figure 1 below. In shorthand, they are: 1) engaging students in meaningful work; 2) developing a balanced assessment system; 3) improving student academic achievement and closing achievement gaps; 4) engaging the community; and 5) optimizing all resources—human and capital—to ensure our desired outcomes for student success.

The major solution developed out of this initiative is focus. There will always be emergencies and course corrections in public education, but this living document is guiding our priorities. The work we are focusing on is tied back to these five objectives, helping remove much of the politics of special interest. Also, the five objectives are mutually reinforcing, which helps drive engagement. We ask ourselves this key question when faced with a new project: Does this support our strategic plan? If it does, we address it through the objective action teams. If the answer is "no," it is thrown off the cart.

FIGURE 1

Virginia Beach City Public Schools' *Compass to 2015: A Strategic Plan for Student Success*



Source: VBCPS

Implementation Process and Insights

What we did *not* have, both in the creation of the plan and subsequent stages of implementation, was a list of benchmark districts whose experiences we could leverage as we ventured into some unfamiliar territory. We relied on our formative conversations with Dr. Wagner and perspectives on discrete initiatives in select districts, but none with the scale or complexity of Virginia Beach. Listening to our stakeholders was the first significant process step as we sought to define the outcomes we wanted to pursue. The communications challenge was paramount: would the process be known as tackling the "scary or unknown" or were we selling the "exciting and innovative"? Our stakeholder engagement process showed us that we could focus on the latter paradigm.

In addition to the district leadership team, the School Board was the prime mover for the program. Its original Program of Work mandated that staff and administration create a strategic plan that reflected community priorities while meeting all students' learning needs. A Board-appointed Strategic Plan Steering Committee, which

VBCPS Strategic Objectives

1. All teachers will engage every student in meaningful, authentic, and rigorous work through the use of innovative instructional practices and supportive technologies that will motivate students to be self-directed and inquisitive learners.
2. VBCPS will develop and implement a balanced assessment system that accurately reflects student demonstration and mastery of VBCPS outcomes for student success.
3. Each school will improve achievement for all students while closing achievement gaps for identified student groups, with particular focus on African American males.
4. VBCPS will create opportunities for parents, community, and business leaders to fulfill their essential roles as actively engaged partners in supporting student achievement and outcomes for student success.
5. VBCPS will be accountable for developing essential leader, teacher, and staff competencies and optimizing all resources to achieve the school division's strategic goal and outcomes for student success.

included three Board members, managed the plan's development. Members also were active in the community forums, surveys, discussions, town hall meetings, etc., used to garner information and data. Board members spent many hours talking to constituents about the program. In addition, numerous Board workshops were devoted to the program as the Steering Committee worked to reflect the community's mandate that students need learning skills, not testing skills. After months of gathering and synthesizing data, the Committee created the compact, comprehensive document that is *Compass to 2015*, a strategic plan that articulates community values while stipulating academic outcomes that prepare students for 21st-century challenges.

Many have asked us, "Where do you start?" Or, "How do you sequence the implementation?" Our answer is: "Do it all." We believe that sequencing the rollout, from a content perspective, does not work. As our Deputy Superintendent Sheila Magula has noted, "You can't wait until a 'right time'—there is value in jumping into the water." Nevertheless, as we roll out the new plan, we have identified 24 schools as "early adopters" of key strategic plan initiatives in the areas of technology, balanced assessment, and responsiveness to student needs. These early adopters will help mentor and coach the next wave of schools. As we reflect on the initial phases of implementation, we are ready to share some honest insights about our process for each strategic objective.

Objective One: Engage Every Student

Objective One focuses on 21st-century curriculum and instruction. This objective was originally led by Christine Caskey, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction (now with Katy ISD in Texas); Don Robertson, principal of Salem High School; and Joe Burnsworth, then director of secondary education. Burnsworth, now assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, will move into Dr. Caskey's leadership role on this objective. This team led the realignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment with *Compass to 2015*, especially as it relates to the identified 21st-century skills.

> "Many have asked us, 'Where do you start?' Or, 'How do you sequence the implementation?' Our answer is: 'Do it all.'"

In some regards, our second objective (developing a balanced assessment system) preceded the first, and nowhere is the close collaboration and overlap between objectives as apparent as here. We have followed the philosophy that we need to figure out our student achievement goals, design the assessment structure to measure success, and then create the curriculum to get us there. This involved a definition and grouping of the desired outcomes. Both objectives one and two are critical in developing a continuum of skill development ▷

to map activities to span a child's engagement with the district over time. The continuum itself has been a point of success in the program to-date. Teachers in particular have shown high levels of interest and excitement. The best news of all to me was witnessing that the excitement was in fact contagious!

Of significant importance at this stage was how together as a district we developed a common understanding for what we were trying to accomplish. We needed to answer "What does this actually look like?" for the teacher, the principal, and the students. An important understanding grew throughout our community: we will never be done with this process. Curriculum is forever changing, and "It's OK" to move away from what is well-known and comfortable.

"An important understanding grew throughout our community: we will never be done with this process. Curriculum is forever changing, and 'It's OK' to move away from what is well-known and comfortable."

Once a common taxonomy was articulated, we completed a thorough audit of existing curriculum and instruction and focused on a rigorous gap analysis. What did we have already that would help get us where we needed to go? What legacy curriculum could we discontinue? Our team also developed a matrix to track the alignment of existing curriculum and the addition of exemplary learning plans and assessments. Ongoing challenges included helping key staff, including directors and coordinators, address the time challenges inherent in their work, yet simultaneously manage to encourage their ownership and commitment. Managerial practices that we have found especially useful in pursuing the objective are a network of teacher leaders who helped us develop and review the exemplars and to teach the mandatory staff development. We also had teachers who did field testing of learning plans and assessments. Also, mandatory summer training for all teachers helped address nervousness and build a library of "exemplars"—practitioners that can serve as models for other teachers.

Objective Two: Balanced Assessment

Objective Two focuses on a balanced assessment system. This effort has been chaired by Jared Cotton, assistant superintendent of research evaluation and assessment, with support from Pat Griffin, who recently retired as the principal of one of our high schools. In order to pursue the objective, division-wide rubrics to measure outcomes for student success had to be developed. The first step was to develop and/or align high-quality assessments that measured 21st-century skills.

These desired outcomes ensure that students are academically proficient, effective communicators and collaborators, globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens, critical and creative thinkers, innovators, and problem-solvers. The team investigated methods to report student progress and explore measures to compare progress with those in other school divisions and districts throughout the state and nation. Additionally, part of Jared Cotton's responsibility was to focus on quality control to ensure student performance tasks are meaningful opportunities. Most challenging in this dialogue were some formative discussions around how to measure success in select outcomes areas. We needed to retain a focus on measuring outcomes, not the process to get there.

Ultimately, assessments had to be created for myriad areas, and we were able to leverage the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA) effectively. We were also able to create similar problem-based assessments in-house by developing assessments for grades four and seven that assess the same skills as the CWRA. Our longer-term objective is to move students to be evaluated by digital portfolios, assembled over time and organized by outcomes areas. Mimicking work patterns in business, the military, and elsewhere, students will work on projects that will selectively be added to their portfolios, and we are working on assess-

ment protocols for this aspect of our strategy. Finally, we are developing a supplementary report card for families to foster broader engagement and support.

Objective Three: Improved Achievement

This objective addresses the need to improve student achievement for all students while closing gaps for identified student groups, particularly African American males. Objective Three is led by Jobynia Caldwell, assistant superintendent of high school education, Esther Monclova-Johnson, director of equity affairs, and Lavern Chatman, principal of Newtown Elementary. Using a metaphor, Caldwell and Monclova-Johnson view Objective Three as "providing the glue" for the strategic plan: instruction and student engagement are the answers to long-term success.

The team's role is to create a cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic process for pursuing equity objectives in the district. Given the significant scope, the team credits a process of "funneling down" whereby the district refined broad objectives down to specific work. An example initiative is called Candid Conversations about Race that will eventually result in training for school administrators on how to host productive conversations in their buildings. This team will also develop a Response to Intervention Plan (RTI) and supporting training plan. Response to Intervention is a tiered approach to providing students with needed interventions and support in the areas of academics and/or behavior. Reflecting on what has worked well, the overall strategic planning effort drove unprecedented clarity in both vision and messaging, which has successfully reduced anxiety and allowed change to occur more smoothly.

Objective Four: Create Opportunities

This objective addresses community engagement. Led by Kathy O'Hara, assistant superintendent for media and communications development, with support from Larry Ames, principal of Seatack Elementary, and Melissa McQuarrie, director of community relations, the team focuses on opportunities for parents, communities, and business leaders to become more actively engaged partners in supporting student achievement. ▷

This school year the Objective Four action team will be developing a plan to enhance and expand the division's mentorship program. Also on the work plan for the next school year is further collaboration with city and community agencies to improve support to families, particularly the underserved parent population; develop materials for Board members to use as they encourage involvement of the community in the schools; investigate the feasibility of expanding the use of computer labs after hours in Title I schools; and develop a plan to host breakfast dialogue meetings in the community with Cabinet members serving as guest speakers.

> "We are still early in the overall process, but to make real progress we need to push forward through areas of uncertainty. As Deputy Superintendent Sheila Magula says, 'Perfectionists need to let go.'"

According to O'Hara, the district has undergone a "philosophical shift" due to the engagement and input from parents, the School Board, and underserved stakeholders. Overall, the district mindset to external stakeholders went from dispensing information to delivering service. One of the flagship initiatives—Parent Connection—is a thoughtful combination of face-to-face parent training and electronic resources. The district regularly hosts parent seminars on topics of interest (for example, positive discipline, parenting the strong-willed child, helping children transition to middle school, etc.). Among the online resources offered is a parent portal that gives parents access to their children's grades and academic records.

Objective Five: Capacity Building

Objective Five focuses on professional development, building the capacity of our school division's leaders, teachers, and staff, and maximizing resources in order to achieve the division's outcomes for students. Objective Five is co-chaired by Sheila Magula, deputy superintendent, and James Pohl, now principal of Princess Anne High School, and Shirann Lewis, director of elementary education.

Our initial training focus began with our 86 school principals because it is their leadership that will make or break the desired cultural shift. We approached training through monthly collaborative sessions hosted by school level at which time we examined such instructional areas as identification of 21st century skills and the attendant "look fors" in classroom learning walks. Other topics included implementation of *Understanding by Design* (Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe) in the Virginia Beach curriculum; performance-based assessments; and integration of technology into instructional practices.

Building on these leadership discussions is the expressed expectation that each school leadership team will do its part to foster learning cultures in their building. As a result, most of our principals have strategically deployed Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are at the crux of much of the work to be done in the schools this school year. As the planning was being formulated, principals' top choice of strategy was clear: allow the existing PLC process to drive both professional development and the school improvement plan (SIP) structures. Other plans include the establishment of a video library of best practices with a document index and additional information on other supporting professional development outreaches.

Overall, the district has a "rapid response" mentality regarding professional development: What are you going *to do* with this? Contrary to many districts, Virginia Beach does not have a history of demanding greater and greater quantities of professional development. Since 2001, we have had the same time requirements in place and our professional development has largely focused on the needs represented by particular points in time. What we are wrestling with now, however, is the imperative to move to the kind of professional development that supports our cultural shift—from success on state standards to student acquisition of 21st-century skills. We are in the beginning stages

now of establishing a Center for Teacher Leadership, which will be staffed by teacher leaders who will help us design the appropriate professional development. In the meantime, ongoing work includes increasing the amount of job-embedded professional development. Fundamentally, we accept that capacity building is a non-linear process, but we are giving the process some order.

Overall management and measurement of the strategic objectives is a public process, with continuous progress tracking tools used to discuss and communicate milestones. All stakeholders are welcome to click through our website to view these documents at all times.

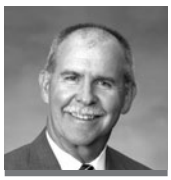
Our Early Results

Compass to 2015 already has posted some impressive results:

- School leaders and some teachers are doing learning walks to identify instructional best practices aligned with the district's strategic objectives.
- A new assessment, the College Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA), is in use.
- Courageous Conversations About Race, an equity initiative, is helping staff discuss causes and solutions for teacher-student behaviors contributing to inequities in the classroom.
- A dynamic video library of best teaching practices with an accompanying facilitators' guide appropriate to each school level has been developed.
- Learning Culture framework has been developed with an online link to resources that support the strategic objectives. These resources are also designed to address the four critical questions related to student learning: 1) What do we want students to learn? 2) How will we know when each student has learned it? 3) How will we respond when students don't learn it and when they already know it? 4) How will we involve parents and the community to support student learning?
- A strategic plan web page has been developed that is designed to foster community understanding of our objectives. Resources include a summary of 21st-century skills and video progress reports.
- The Parent Connection initiative has held ten parent workshops and one half-day conference. Approximately 1,600 parents have attended.
- Online access to student grades and records has been provided to parents.
- Helping underserved parents is a major goal. Accomplishments include: working with the local food bank to provide food over weekends to needy children in Title I schools; opening computer labs after-hours in some schools; and providing computers to needy families.

We are proud of our accomplishments in transforming our district operations around 21st-century skills outcomes. We are still early in the overall process, but to make real progress we need to push forward through areas of uncertainty. As Deputy Superintendent Sheila Magula says, "Perfectionists need to let go." We look forward to serving our students and community to meet their future needs, not just today's.

Those who want more information on the *Compass to 2015* should visit the strategic plan page at http://www.vbschools.com/compass/index.asp. There are videos on four of the five objectives, a list of the identified 21st-century skills for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, a master glossary, and additional resources such as books and web sites on 21st-century learning.



DR. JAMES G. MERRILL IS THE SUPERINTENDENT OF VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, A POSITION HE ASSUMED IN JULY 2006. THE DISTRICT SERVES 69,469 STUDENTS IN 85 SCHOOLS. DR. MERRILL IS A 35-YEAR VETERAN EDUCATOR. HE WAS A MOREHEAD SCHOLAR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL WHERE HE EARNED HIS BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN EDUCATION IN SECONDARY ENGLISH. HE HOLDS A MASTER'S DEGREE IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION FROM APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY AND A DOCTORAL DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO.

Fairfax County Public Schools – Part II: *Improving Budget Communications with the Community*

Several questions typically arise when thinking about community engagement during times of budget constraints. How knowledgeable and supportive is the community with regard to your district's finances? What input from these stakeholders should you include in the decision-making process? What outside priorities should you reflect? How should you communicate with key stakeholder groups in the community?

| BY JOHN J-H KIM AND GARRETT M. SMITH

In 2009, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Virginia completed a major budget rationalization process, which yielded a reduction of approximately 4% on a per student basis from the prior year. Despite FCPS' significant effort to communicate and elicit input, feedback from the community and key advisory groups revealed several issue-oriented detractors and some lack of awareness about how FCPS manages the budget. FCPS realized the need to proactively include budget messaging in its overall communications strategy in order to foster better understanding of FCPS finances and to better engage stakeholders in future district fiscal decisions.

The Prior Year's Budget Rationalization Process in Fairfax

Almost exactly one year prior to when the events in this case study unfolded, the Fairfax County Public Schools—the twelfth-largest school system in the nation—confronted a high degree of budget uncertainty. To cope with the unknown, Fairfax school leaders created a new budget planning process to account for various cost-cutting scenarios that might be needed. Seventy-five percent of the district's budget comes from Fairfax County (the rest from state and federal resources), giving local taxpayers a larger stake in the health of district finances than in many other school districts. In an effort to protect the programs and resources that make Fairfax County Public Schools one of the most successful districts in the country, Superintendent Jack Dale took several steps to design a budget rationalization process. First, Dale aligned the overall process with the School Board's Strategic Governance Initiative, which includes the district's mission and guiding priorities. This alignment ensured that the school board could continue to maintain the district's high-performance. (For more information, please see "Fairfax County Public Schools: Rethinking Budget Rationalization" by Jack D. Dale in *The District Management Journal*, v.3)

Fairfax County Public Schools Fast Facts

- $2.2 billion operating budget for 2010 (a decrease of $10.3 million, or 0.5% from the FY2009 approved budget)
- 175,296 FY2011 total projected enrollment
- 196 schools and centers
- 12th-largest school system in the country
- 22,149 full-time equivalent positions
- One of the largest employers in Virginia

Second, FCPS created a process to gather community input on the budget while also educating the public about the budget process and content. Fairfax County Public Schools, in conjunction with Fairfax County government, held community meetings, employee brown bags and surveys, and online and telephone forums for members of the community to express their concerns. Also, FCPS put all budget presentations and documents online to increase transparency. In total, seventy-two focus groups were conducted with over 700 members of the public and employee populations in order to gather information about the quality of services delivered and to collect suggestions.

The third component of the process was to have the leadership team review every program offered in the district. The team used a tool to evaluate the efficiency and value of each program, and had to recommend one of four actions: 1) Keep as is; 2) Reduce; 3) Restructure; and 4) Eliminate. All the programs were listed in one document that included the program name, cost, number of students served, indication of team support for various options, and final recommendations. The district's leadership team, which consisted of the superintendent, assistant superintendents, the chief financial officer, select principal representatives, and the school board clerk, met weekly to go through the programs one-by-one, to assess the overall value of that program against the district's priorities. These meetings enabled fact-based conversations to address budget constraints and operating priorities simultaneously.

As a result of this three-part process, the FCPS School Board adopted a FY2010 budget of $2.2 billion, a decrease of $10.3 million or 0.5% from the previous year. With growth in student enrollment, this equated to a 4% decrease on a per student basis.

Academic Achievement Facts

- 98% of all FCPS general education schools meet or exceed the Virginia Standards of Accreditation
- FCPS student achievement improved in all subgroups as measured by the 2007-2008 SOL (Standards of Learning) tests
- 94.5% of FCPS graduates continue on to post-secondary education
- FCPS' SAT average of 1664 exceeds both the state average of 1522 and the national average of 1511

Engaging Stakeholders on Budget Issues

On the heels of these difficult FY2010 budget cuts, Fairfax County Public Schools anticipates further budget reductions for the upcoming 2011 fiscal year. ▷

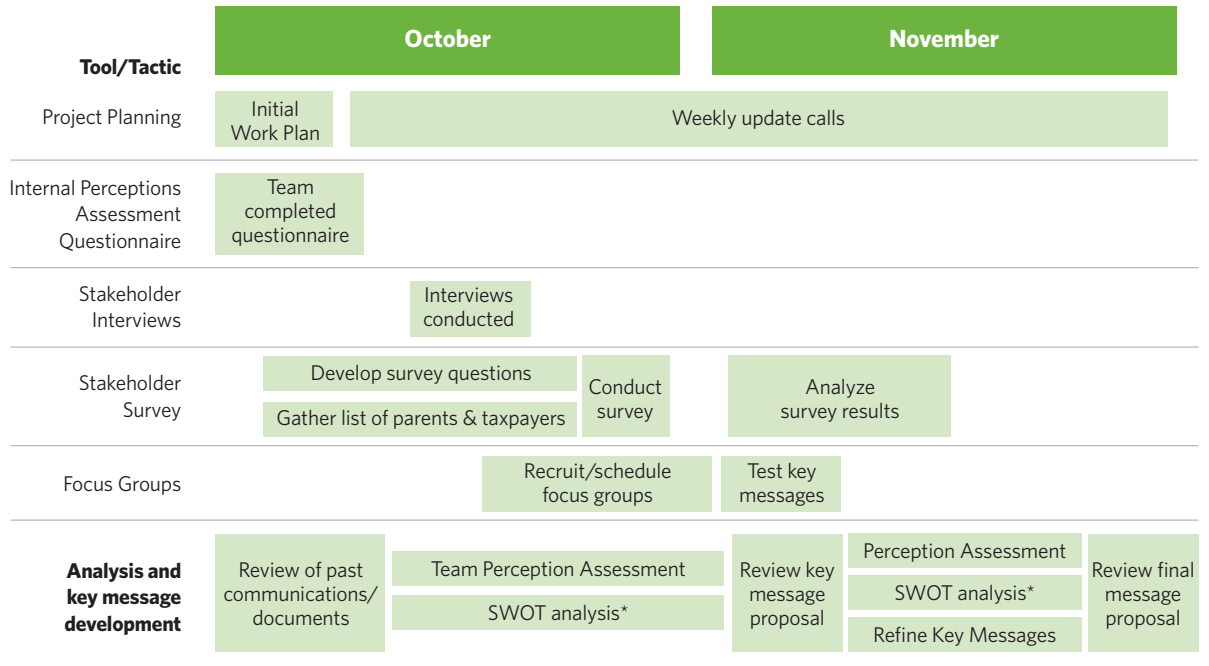
In the spirit of continuous improvement, FCPS recognized an opportunity to improve communications about the tradeoffs they would have to make in response to the ongoing budget challenges.

When FCPS evaluated community sentiment for this budget reprioritization, school leaders hypothesized a lack of awareness among key stakeholders about how and why the district was making budget decisions. Despite the robust process in FY2010, many parents and taxpayers still felt the district had made budgeting decisions without hearing community needs. For example, to cut a portion of money from the budget, FCPS had removed several bus stops; it became clear that the public did not understand the rationale for this decision and was not aware that these cuts helped support academic programs. The district needed to communicate better the positive impact that these cost savings could have on programs that enhance student achievement—the community's main priority in Fairfax County.

The real questions were: How should the district improve its messaging strategy to communicate effectively with key stakeholders? How could district leaders inspire community champions for budget measures? FCPS realized it needed to alter its budget messaging in order to educate the community and gain community partners in championing district initiatives. Led by Barbara Hunter, Fairfax County Public Schools' Assistant Superintendent for Communications and Community Outreach, district leaders compiled a plan to involve stakeholders and gather community input in the decision-making process. The district engaged DMC to help formulate the new communications strategy through research and analysis of stakeholder priorities and perceptions. Beginning with the important step of identifying key stakeholder groups in the community, the work plan called for a two-month process of research and fact-finding, analysis of insights, and crafting key messages for budget decisions (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Process Overview & Work Plan



Source: FCPS/DMC

**Analysis to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats involved.*

EXHIBIT 1

Sample Survey Questions from Online Survey Tool

11. Which options would you support to help resolve the budget deficit? (select all that apply)
- ○ State Tax Increase
- ○ Local Tax Increase
- ○ Increased Cost of Services (increased fees for parking, athletics, extracurricular activities)
- ○ Reduction in School Services
- ○ Reduction in Other County Services

12. Are you aware of the budget cuts that were made last year?
- ○ Yes
- ○ No

13. If yes, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Last year, FCPS did a good job reallocating resources and making cuts, despite the large budget shortfall"?
- ○ Agree
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Disagree

Source: FCPS/DMC

The plan included four main stages:

1. Gather input from key stakeholders through primary research
2. Analyze research and generate insights
3. Develop and test key messages
4. Build and roll out a revised district-wide communications strategy

With a projected deficit of $170 million in the coming fiscal year, Fairfax County Public Schools aimed to put forth a targeted communications strategy to make district cuts fully transparent and accepted by the community. Figure 1 shows the detailed tools and tactics used by the project team to build a revised communications approach over a two-month period.

Stage 1: Gather Input from Key Stakeholders

During the research phase of the initiative, the district needed to gain a more detailed understanding of community perceptions and concerns so that messaging could target these areas more proactively, with greater specificity and more accurate information. To assist in hypothesis development, the project team kicked off the research phase by executing an internal assessment of how its existing communications were perceived. Members of FCPS' communications office answered questions about their perception of the district's image as well as suggestions for improvements.

Next, FCPS interviewed key individual stakeholders to capture how they perceived the district and what could be done to improve district communications related to budget initiatives. Interviewees were selected from groups with broad impact such as the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, in addition to teachers and principals. The interviews revealed strong support for FCPS, especially around its accomplishments with student achievement. All stakeholders acknowledged the need to cut costs in the district, though there were mixed opinions on the district's approach to allocate resources effectively. Based on this initial feedback, it was clear that the district had an opportunity to improve its communications process.

With hypotheses developed, an online survey to the community tested these qualitative findings in a broader, more quantitative fashion (Exhibit 1). FCPS recruited employees, parents and taxpayers to participate in the online survey to gauge the community's impressions of the district's budgeting activities. Sample questions from the online survey include *"Are you aware of budget cuts that were made last year?"* And *"What options would you support to help resolve the budget deficit?"* Two important response results are shown in Figure 2.

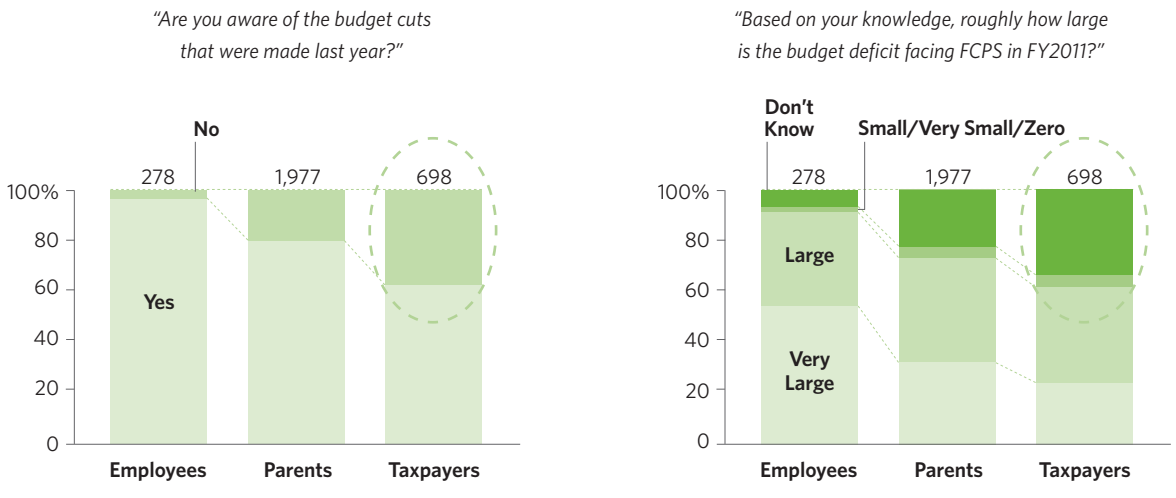
Stage 2: Analyze Research and Generate Insights

Survey results showed a generally positive view of Fairfax County Public Schools, but also an awareness gap regarding how district leaders handled the budget. As shown in Figure 2, close to 40 percent of Fairfax taxpayers said they did not know about the budget cuts made in fiscal year 2010. An even higher percentage questioned FCPS' resource allocation. These responses pointed to the need for more organized and fact-supported district communications.

Using the facts generated in the research phase, the project team focused on identifying key actionable insights that could be applied to a revised communications strategy. Figure 3 highlights one critical insight—that all Fairfax County stakeholders strongly consider student achievement to be the primary measure of district performance. ▷

FIGURE 2

Stakeholder Awareness of Fairfax County Public Schools Budget Issues



Source: FCPS/DMC Stakeholder Survey

This basic realization, which may not be shared by many communities, suggested that explicit connections should be made between all budgetary decisions and the potential effects or tradeoffs related to student achievement.

The research also yielded important data regarding attitudes towards the options for solving the budget deficit. A second major insight was equally important—and to many, surprising. While the community did call for innovation in cutting costs, which FCPS had done successfully in the previous fiscal year, half of the stakeholders surveyed supported some form of tax or fee increase to solve the deficit (Figure 4). To cut costs going forward, some stakeholders called for school programs to be cut, while the majority of community members advocated for the programs, citing protection of student achievement.

Among other things, the survey data also revealed that most Fairfax County taxpayers received their knowledge of FCPS budget activities through the news media—a sign that FCPS could further optimize its message delivery by media channels.

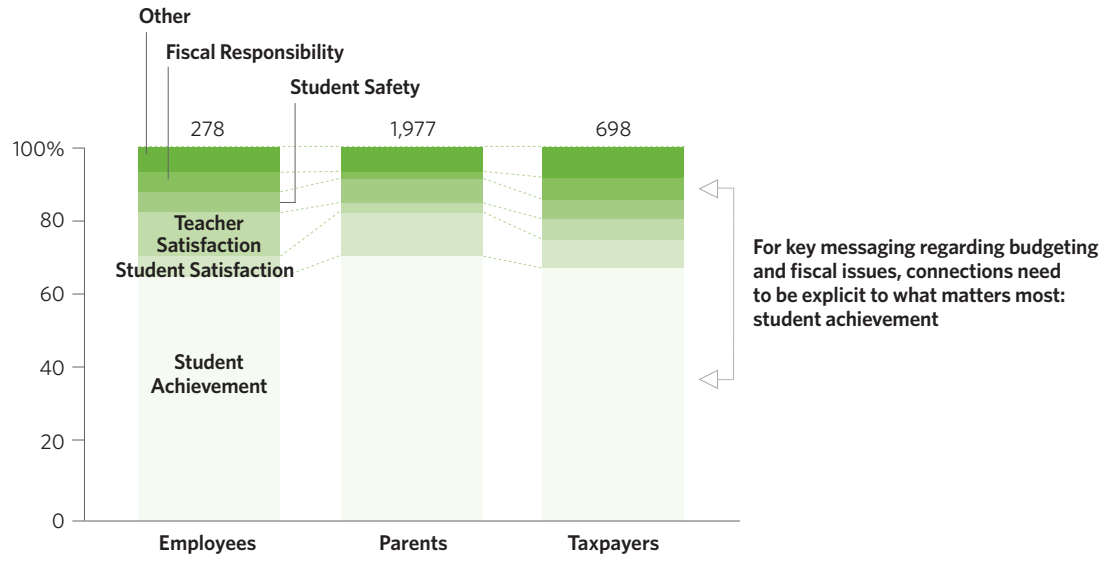
Stage 3: Develop & Test Key Messages

Using insights from the interviews and the survey results, the project team reviewed past communications and developed proposals for new key messaging themes. The school district had to answer some important questions in order to create the right messages going forward: Which key messages resonate with each stakeholder group? Which messages would resonate most broadly across all segments? The project team focused on the tone, the topic, and the language around the key budgeting communications. These three parameters set clear objectives and boundaries for adjusting communications going forward. For each,

FIGURE 3

What Matters to Which Stakeholder Group

"Which issue do you consider to be the most critical when you think about the performance of FCPS?"



Source: FCPS/DMC Stakeholder Survey

guiding questions were created. For example:

- Tone: Should we bias the communication to more emotional or more rational themes?
- Topic: Should we combine topics or focus on just one?
- Language: Should we choose generic language or more specific?

In total, eight guiding parameters were developed.

FCPS then vetted the sample messages using focus groups comprised of individuals from the district's main stakeholder groups—parents, teachers, and the business community. Separate 90-minute focus groups were held for three groups: the local business community, teachers, and parents. Each focus group had between nine and thirteen participants selected as a diverse cross-section of the stakeholder group.

The focus group results confirmed earlier findings about attributes that define the district: good reputation, high achieving students, and high caliber teachers. In addition, the district confirmed that targeting specific messages to each stakeholder group could increase overall awareness of its budgetary initiatives and its role as a school district.

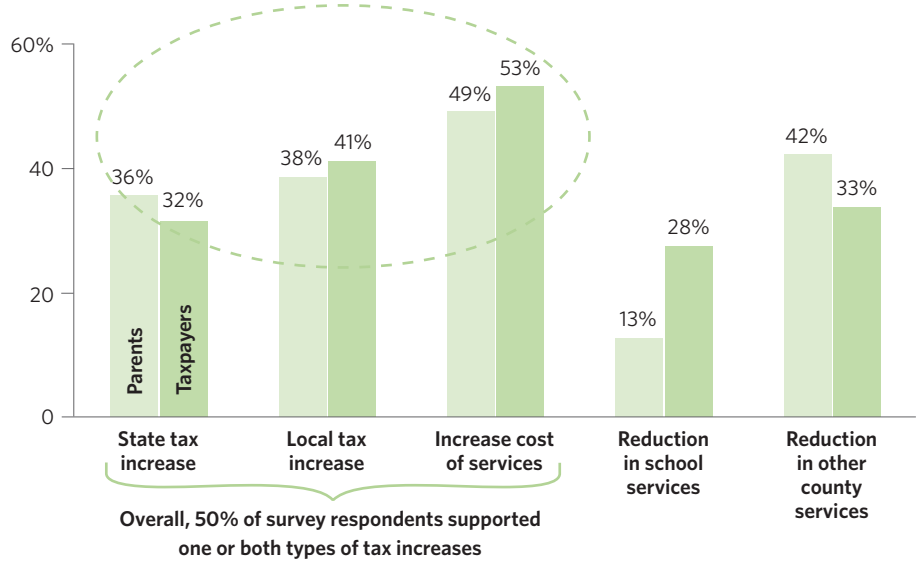
Stage 4: Build & Roll Out a Revised District-wide Communications Strategy

Based on the research and insights developed in the earlier phases, the project team crafted a range of messaging options that targeted each stakeholder group. The district designed messages that were specific and personal, as well as ones that placed the overarching topic of student achievement at the center of all future communications (Figure 5). For example, FCPS stated the current issue at hand (a projected deficit of ~$200 million), then established the possible result (how the lack of budget resolution could result in the deterioration of student program offerings and performance), and lastly, provided facts to engage that particular stakeholder group. FCPS also inserted confident, emotional language into its messaging to build a trusting relationship with the community. A sample ▷

FIGURE 4

Revenue vs. Cost Strategy Preferences

Which options would you support to help resolve the budget deficit? (check all that apply)



Source: FCPS/DMC Stakeholder Survey

message might read: "We have some of the best schools in the state—and the country—and I'm proud to support my district in any way to continue that achievement."

The revised budget communications strategy, rolled out in December 2009, offers several methods to control how the district message is disseminated.

The district will:

- Focus efforts during the critical two months of the budget process on audiences who will be most compelled to act—parents and teachers.
- Identify a coalition of business leaders who will also be compelled to act.
- Develop a longer-term strategy for taxpayers and business people that includes increased frequency of communications.
- Launch a new official FCPS budget communications tool, *The Bottom Line*, directed toward all parents, all employees, and information subscribers (Exhibit 2).
- Continue a robust web presence on budget facts, process, and news.
- Encourage school board members to reach out to PTAs, parents, and businesses and inform them of the budget situation.
- Develop new understanding among school principals of their role in communicating facts about the budget to their staff, parents, business partners; provide them with budget communication tools.

In addition, a PowerPoint presentation narrated by the Superintendent and posted on the budget web page

Ask Yourself...

How Well is Your District Communicating?

- Who are your primary stakeholders?
- In planning your district's budgetary responses to the ongoing fiscal crisis, have you adjusted your strategy to align with community priorities?
- Are you communicating budget cuts and resource reallocations effectively to your stakeholders? How do you know?
- How are your stakeholders receiving information regarding your district decisions? How much control do you currently have over the message being communicated?

FIGURE 5

Sample Communication Language

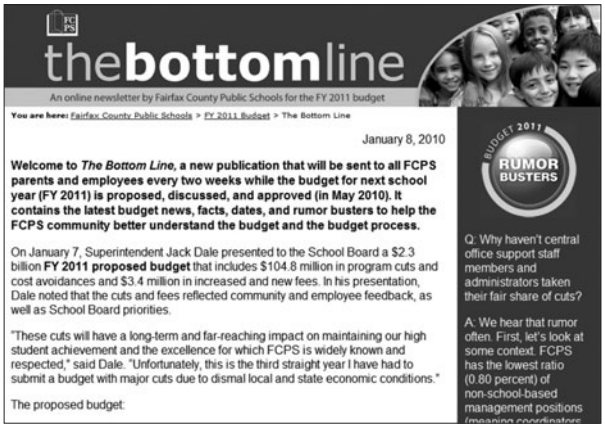
***"Keep in Touch"* (Sample)**	As part of the ongoing budget process to realize savings in a tight budget year, Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) Office of Transportation Services is proposing adjustments to the 2009-10 school year bell schedules that are projected to result in annual savings of more than $4.6 million. These adjustments are separate and apart from the proposal to change school start times that the Fairfax County School Board considered and voted to reject in March 2009. The new adjustments focus on achieving efficiencies within the current bell structure, which the Fairfax County School Board voted to retain. The potential new bell schedules will not be implemented until and if the Fairfax County School Board adopts it as part of the FY 2010 budget process.
Revised *"Keep in Touch"* (Sample with new Umbrella Message)	**As part of our continued efforts to maintain the highest levels of student achievement in the face of the fiscal challenges of a tight budget year,** Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) Office of Transportation Services is proposing adjustments to the 2009-10 school year bell schedules that are projected to result in annual savings of more than $4.6 million. These adjustments are separate and apart from the proposal to change school start times that the Fairfax County School Board considered and voted to reject in March 2009. The new adjustments focus on achieving efficiencies within the current bell structure, which the Fairfax County School Board voted to retain. The potential new bell schedules will not be implemented until and if the Fairfax County School Board adopts it as part of the FY 2010 budget process. **These savings will help us maintain the programs and services that support our mission of excellent student achievement.**

provides principals and PTA leaders with a ready-to-go tool to use in presentations to staff and parents.

Final Thoughts

Fairfax County Public Schools used a proactive, data-driven approach to strengthen its budget communications strategy and to use messaging that will resonate with diverse stakeholder groups and engage the community. FCPS is leveraging its insights, generated from qualitative interview input and quantitative survey data, to cut costs effectively and in a way that is acceptable to the community. The district moved beyond what it thought the community was thinking to find out what they were *actually* thinking. Using the factbase of feedback, Fairfax County Public Schools turned strategy into practice through the use of tools that educate both the district and its stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial solutions.

EXHIBIT 2



thebottomline

An online newsletter by Fairfax County Public Schools for the FY 2011 budget

You are here: Fairfax County Public Schools > FY 2011 Budget > The Bottom Line

January 8, 2010

Welcome to *The Bottom Line*, a new publication that will be sent to all FCPS parents and employees every two weeks while the budget for next school year (FY 2011) is proposed, discussed, and approved (in May 2010). It contains the latest budget news, facts, dates, and rumor busters to help the FCPS community better understand the budget and the budget process.

On January 7, Superintendent Jack Dale presented to the School Board a $2.3 billion **FY 2011 proposed budget** that includes $104.8 million in program cuts and cost avoidances and $3.4 million in increased and new fees. In his presentation, Dale noted that the cuts and fees reflected community and employee feedback, as well as School Board priorities.

"These cuts will have a long-term and far-reaching impact on maintaining our high student achievement and the excellence for which FCPS is widely known and respected," said Dale. "Unfortunately, this is the third straight year I have had to submit a budget with major cuts due to dismal local and state economic conditions."

The proposed budget:

BUDGET 2011 RUMOR BUSTERS

Q: Why haven't central office support staff members and administrators taken their fair share of cuts?

A: We hear that rumor often. First, let's look at some context. FCPS has the lowest ratio (0.80 percent) of non-school-based management positions

JOHN J-H KIM IS CEO OF THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JJHK@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.

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Simsbury Public Schools:
Innovation through a Rethinking of Special Education

How does a leader go about challenging conventional wisdom in a district when things seem like they are already well-planned, logical, and based on internal consensus? Further, how do you do this in the face of declining resources? Perhaps most importantly, how do you get an organization to think about meeting goals by doing things *differently,* instead of requesting that everyone simply do *more*?

| BY NATE LEVENSON AND AMY M. SUTHERLAND

Dr. Diane Ullman, superintendent of Simsbury Public Schools (Simsbury) in Connecticut, has been successful at addressing these questions through a continuous improvement mindset that drives all aspects of Simsbury's planning. Despite broad success in many areas, Ullman felt very strongly that there was room to innovate to better meet the needs of students by improving the use of district resources. Beginning with the district's special education students, Ullman knew that the system needed a fresh look to drive higher performance. However, a focus on special education forces a hard look at general education, and the pursuit of change needs to encompass system-wide thinking. Simsbury's decision to embark on a path that would require significant change highlights several key successes in district management; this case can give district leaders and other key stakeholders insight into service innovation, change management processes, as well as specific approaches to improve the quality of special education.

Simsbury, like many districts, had designed its special education programs with a heavy dependence on paraprofessionals, in capacities such as behavior management, academic support, and social support for students with high-functioning autism. None of this, however, has been proven to be helpful for a student in the long run.[i] Similarly, the district was putting a lot of resources into one-on-one speech and language services and reading support, when research demonstrates that students develop better proficiency in those areas when they learn in a group setting.[ii] The intentions of the old system had been noble: the thought was that if a group model helps students, then individual attention must be better. But, more recent research and best practice models indicated some of Simsbury's programs had been built on outdated assumptions and did not take into consideration the cost-benefit tradeoff.

Ullman had been trying to push for change for several years. "Nothing that I tried really started a

Simsbury Public Schools
Fast Facts

- Hartford County, CT
- ~5000 students
- 5-Year enrollment change: -2.0%
- Per-student expenditures: ~$12,000
- % of expeditures from local revenue: 87.1% (excl. school construction)
- Percent of district expenditures used on special education: 18.3%

Second grade students are eager to show Dr. Ullman what they have been learning.

different dialogue. I really needed to get leverage, and find a way to get the conversation to change about special education." Despite outcomes that were by many measures admirable, she was troubled by her district's overall approach, which she felt wasn't maximally serving its students. A long standing District Management Council (DMC) member, Ullman brought her leadership team into a partnership with DMC in a focused consulting effort—a partnership that would serve to explore and ultimately adopt opportunities that would significantly improve Simsbury's service to special education students and their families, and would also improve the delivery of related general education services.

Challenging the Culture: Focus on Practice

What set the district on a course to change its approach to special education? It ultimately began with the recognition that the quality of Simsbury's special education was being compromised by commonly held misconceptions, a comfort with the old way of doing things, and concerns that making programmatic changes involved too much risk.

Explains Ullman, "I realized I was facing as much of a culture problem as a resource problem. My belief is that you don't change culture by working on culture, but by changing practice." To make comprehensive improvements to its special education services, Simsbury had to start by determining the nature of the problem that existed in the district and sizing the key elements that were keeping the current practices in place. The district also had the responsibility of communicating to its stakeholders that its primary concern throughout the process would be improving special education in order to better serve students with special needs.

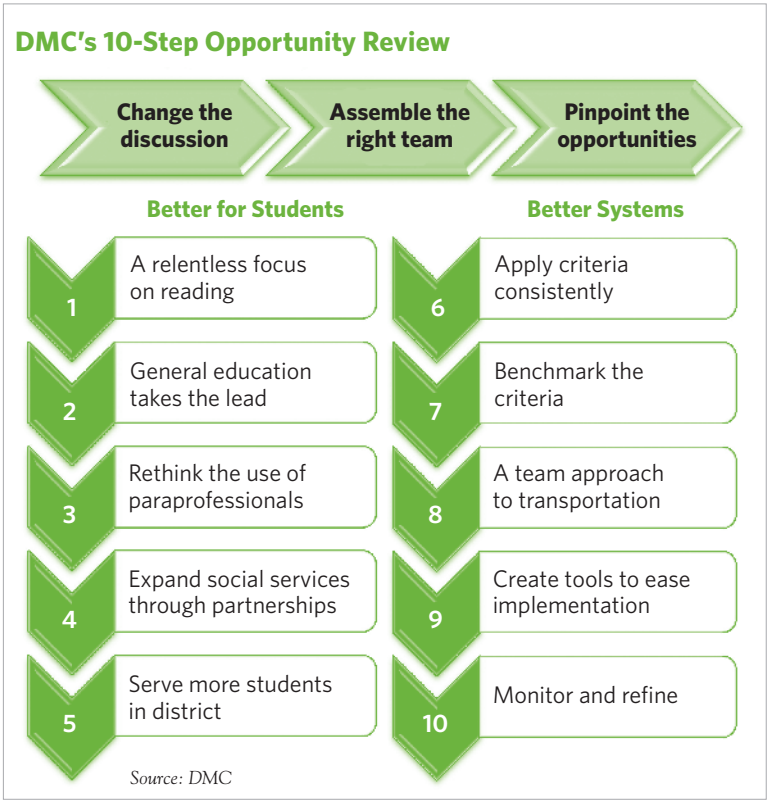
Dr. Ullman was aware that one of the largest obstacles to attempting any change would be the old system itself. She observed that the current 15-year-old system, while constructed with significant thought and careful design, was not supported by current best practices or backed by the most relevant data. Both Ullman and Helen Donaher, Simsbury's director of special services, describe Simsbury's starting point as having "well-intentioned, but misinformed assumptions about what is good for kids."

The factors keeping Simsbury's initial special education system in place were expansive, and any potential changes had significant ramifications for all stakeholders in the district. Ullman knew that in order to better serve the special education students in Simsbury Public Schools, she, in partnership with the leaders of the district, as well as principals, teachers, and parents would have to communicate a compelling and data-driven vision for how Simsbury Public Schools would improve the special education program. Armed with a strong understanding of the change management process, the district was acutely aware of the importance of engaging everyone in any potential changes. Says Ullman, "If we didn't get teachers to understand that we were trying to do better, we would be lost."

> "I realized I was facing as much of a culture problem as a resource problem. My belief is that you don't change culture by working on culture, but by changing practice," says Ullman.

Among Simsbury's top leadership, a decision was made to actively pursue better and more innovative approaches to the special education system. Ullman had seen presentations on DMC's Special Education Opportunities Review process (Figure 1) and was intrigued by aspects of the review process. Ullman ▷

FIGURE 1



and Donaher determined that their organization had the dedication and commitment to serving students, but did not have the resources to collect and analyze data and explore the best improvements it could make to its programs. Through the Special Education Opportunities Review, Simsbury was able to review its special education data in relation to best practices. The leadership was able to examine the existing situation and build understanding and buy-in to pursue recommendations for systemic improvements.

Building Understanding: Objectivity and the Importance of Data

Having the chance to reflect on relevant data is an important step in building understanding for change. As Helen Donaher notes, "In special education, we always have a lot of data around us, but we weren't used to looking at it in a way that really helped rethink opportunities to improve services." Betsy Gunsalus, director of elementary curriculum, reflects, "The DMC team brought two main sources of value to the ongoing discussion in Simsbury: first, a hard look at data in a different way than we were used to, and second, a logical process to guide the district through new recommendations, decision-making, and implementation." Ullman notes that DMC's presentation to a key stakeholder group—the Simsbury Board of Education—convinced the district that the new approach was the right one, and allowed public commentary to support forward progress.

In addition to the research, analysis, and guidance of the overall process, DMC's role in the partnership was also to support understanding, communications, and objective listening within the district. The process began with the DMC team conducting a thorough review of Simsbury's current offerings. This stage included the collection of data and statistics, interviews, classroom visits, and surveys of parents, IEP teams, and administrators. Second, the team analyzed all of the data against various local, state, and national benchmarks; they also looked for correlations and trends across the different types of data collected. Finally, Simsbury leaders and the DMC team shared results and recommendations and, most importantly, facilitated the planning of implementation. The process was tailored specifically to the needs of Simsbury, and it was essential that all stakeholders had an opportunity to voice their opinion.

The data component of Simsbury's special education review was perhaps the most important tool in enhancing understanding throughout the district. For school districts, data-driven inquiry and analysis, when collected and used conscientiously in a review process, has great potential to de-politicize the conversation and keep the focus on objective, student-focused terms. "Uncovering the problem through the use of data was really helpful. The data analysis DMC did wasn't something I had the resources to put together," says Ullman.

Specifically, the team was able to examine trends and outliers, and provide Simsbury an ability to look at its

practices through benchmarking—in this case, taking a number of like districts on a variety of special education topics and showing the district how it compared. DMC was able to collect information in a number of domains—staffing ratios, student achievement, spending allotments, special education criteria—and allow Simsbury to make decisions about its programs. In its final report, DMC included recommendations for Simsbury based on the data collected, but the report also allowed the data to speak for itself. Given data of similar districts as well as state and national benchmarks, Simsbury became well-informed about potential improvements it could make to its special education programming.

It was also essential that in the course of the special education review, the district be conscious of both the major internal and external dynamics that would affect any moves it might make. The process would have to engage both those making the decisions as well as those served by the decisions. Ultimately, the key decision-making would be an internal process conducted by the leaders of the district, but it was important for Simsbury Public Schools to create district-wide awareness cultivated through clear communication and feedback access points for all stakeholders. The district had a responsibility to clearly communicate its agenda and concerns as well as communicate with each stakeholder group throughout the process. It had to balance a variety of its own competing concerns—student achievement, service to students, financial limitations, effectiveness of programs—while also tailoring its approach and response to address the concerns of everyone who would be affected by the process.

To create more awareness and understanding, it was also valuable that stakeholders had an opportunity to voice their opinion to an objective party, one of DMC's primary functions. Ullman, Donaher, and Gunsalus all cite having an objective third party as an important factor in the process; having the objectivity of an outsider increased the district's capacity to understand its current systems. Bringing in an outsider can help diffuse some of the tensions that occur when attempting to alter any sort of long-standing system. Says Ullman of the dynamic of using a third party in this process, "There's no blame-placing; it's not punitive. It's more about saying,'Here's the real deal.' You let data drive the conversation."

Another important aspect of contemplating change was fostering a culture that included active listening and thoughtful consideration. Just as Simsbury Public Schools' management team was striving to be receptive to new data, Simsbury also understood that it must be receptive to input from all stakeholders. The team understood that listening and giving everyone a say was one of the most important ways to mobilize the community to become involved in improving the system. Further, giving as many stakeholders as possible the opportunity to voice their opinion would serve the district by continually reminding it of the diverse priorities that would have to be managed throughout the change process. Ullman recalls that this was one of the most important steps to both fostering understanding and communicating with stakeholders in the district.

> "The team understood that listening and giving everyone a say was one of the most important ways to mobilize the community to become involved in improving the system."

"There's no way around taking the time to listen to people and providing honest answers. The one-on-one interviewing with paraprofessionals, teachers, parents, and principals—the time to talk, for each of them to have a say, and to have it done confidentially, was critical. I really haven't had many people saying, 'but you don't really understand' because they did have a say. They felt heard in the process. This was a critical step for us, and it can't be rushed," said Ullman.

Turning Understanding into Real Change

Simsbury had moved from a peripheral awareness of possible opportunities that existed to a data collection and analysis process that engaged stakeholders and enhanced understanding. A needed next step in the change management process was to move the district from understanding to actual "buy-in" by those ▷

affected by proposed changes and further to implementation.

Upon completing its analysis, DMC presented Simsbury with a detailed report that combined the results of all of its data collection methods. The report was organized into two sections—a series of commendations for Simsbury regarding its achievements with its special education programs and a series of opportunities for improvement that DMC had also recognized. The commendations were admirable; Simsbury continues to do well at many things. First, academic achievement of students with special needs is improving and the achievement gap is narrowing. Second, inclusion is embraced in both theory and practice. Third, the Simsbury Public Schools meet the needs of nearly all children in-district. Fourth, the district provides very high levels of service and has a commitment to going above and beyond. And last but not least, Simsbury's staff have a passion and commitment to ensure that students with special needs achieve academically, socially, and emotionally at high levels.

Based on the data and recommendations by DMC, Simsbury chose to focus on three specific areas:

1. Overuse of paraprofessionals, which leads to less student independence and less instruction from certified teachers.
2. Overuse of speech and language services, which pulls students unnecessarily from core instruction and diverts them from the reading help that they really need.
3. Insufficient and less effective than desired reading intervention and remediation. In Simsbury, roughly 22% of Kindergarten through Grade 5 students got supplemental support, but it wasn't based on best practices. Reading is the gateway to all learning, and lack of reading was the cause of an above average rate of students with special needs.

A major element sustaining the culture that became apparent when Simsbury began analyzing the opportunities was the sheer momentum of the old system. Ullman recounts that she had tried to reduce the number of paraprofessionals, but every year, the number would either return to its initial level or increase. "I never got it to budge because the model in our heads told us that 'this is how we take care of children.'"

Regarding reading, the Simsbury data showed high rates of referral and eligibility in grades K-2, high rates of learning disability and speech impairment, and very high rates of speech and language services. Fundamentally, Simsbury understood that these were all students struggling with reading, and that a comprehensive reading program with intensive remediation and intervention will not only help these students, but also reduce special education costs.[ii] Illustrated in Figure 3, creating one best-practice program for reading intervention instead of the myriad offerings today would not only improve the delivery of reading instruction, but also could positively impact the financial resources used.

The third main area of change addressed speech and language services. As seen in Figure 2, the district has a higher than typical number of students diagnosed with speech impairments and more students receiving speech and language services. These services also continue at a higher than typical rate at the secondary level. Case loads for speech and language therapists are also low versus peer districts. Either the district has more students with speech and language issues or the district has more expansive eligibility criteria. Recom-

FIGURE 2

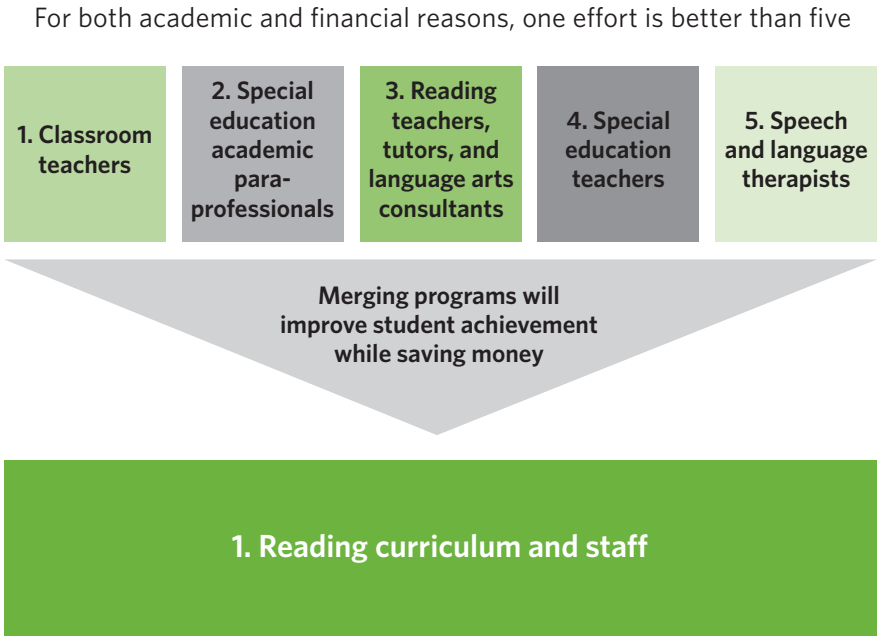
Incidence of Special Needs Per 100 Students

	Simsbury	Like Communities	Difference
Learning disability	5.6	3.5	60%
Speech impairment	2.8	2.2	27%
Other health impairment	1.8	2.2	-18%
Autism	1.1	0.9	22%
Other disabilities	0.7	0.6	17%
Emotional disturbance	0.6	0.6	0%
Intellectual disability	0.5	0.3	67%
Total students in special education	**13.0**	**10.4**	**25%**

Source; Simsbury/DMC

FIGURE 3

Reading Intervention Curriculum and Staff



Source; Simsbury/DMC

mendations centered primarily around development of measurable and uniform criteria.

At this point in the process, Simsbury had the challenge of turning understanding and awareness into buy-in and real solutions for the district. The district had the burden of proving to its stakeholders that any recommendations that it decided to pursue would improve the programs for special education students and not deteriorate an already heavily burdened staff, budget, and sense of parental faith.

Ullman was well aware of the challenges of presenting a compelling vision of an improved special education program in a way that would engage stakeholders. It would require the district to communicate clearly in language and terms that could be understood by all stakeholders with a focus on the factors driving the district to want to improve. It was necessary that the stakeholders understand the "Why?" driving all of the changes. "In a community like ours," states Ullman, "we teach parents to believe in what we were doing. [To successfully implement any changes] we had to know that what we were planning was going to be better."

One of the approaches to foster buy-in has been an internal effort on the part of district leadership. While the desired end result is to create a system that will function better and improve the quality of special education, creating change and buy-in simultaneously can be difficult for those who have to respond to demands that can initially and temporarily increase their workload. Ullman describes one of her biggest responsibilities as the district is undergoing changes as "keeping the vision for what we're trying to do better, and keeping it visible and making it palpable so we're willing to endure some discomfort while we get there."

The district is utilizing a few specific approaches in order to continue to foster understanding and encourage district-wide buy-in. The first is continuing to let data and best practices drive the conversation. Dr. Ullman characterizes one aspect of the old special education system as the following: "[Our data] indicated that our response to kids who weren't ▷

learning was to put them in special education classes." Instead, the district could focus on avoiding this need altogether by increasing reading intervention and remediation early on—a best practice effort. An example of a systemic improvement, the revised approach to reading should not only reduce the number of students who need special education services, but it should also reduce staffing needs, scheduling complexity, and allow funds to be allocated strategically to other student needs. Says Gunsalus, "We haven't actually faced many barriers in pursuing this. The biggest challenge is defining future roles and responsibilities as we bring changes down to the teacher level."

> "This is not a linear process. I am constantly reminded of how strong the pull is to regress back to old practices," says Ullman.

Another important aspect of fostering buy-in is allowing stakeholders to see the district moving forward strategically and consistently. Says Ullman, "One critical piece … is setting up timelines and expectations for when things will get done. This will help us stay the course with the optimism that we can actually do this." This is particularly crucial in transition periods when new programs are not fully in place. The comfort of the old system is gone, and there is concern about what might be ahead. These are the times when districts must communicate and act clearly and consistently. Ullman cautions that this can be a confusing time because the process of change for a school district is by no means cut-and-dried. "This is not a linear process," Ullman emphasizes, "I am constantly reminded of how strong the pull is to regress back to old practices." However, with clear guidelines and timelines, Donaher is hopeful that even the most cautious of stakeholders will be able to see the district's accomplishments and an endpoint to the challenges of transition. Donaher also notes that the overall process has been successful with internal audiences, but that families are simply harder to convince and need more time.

Ownership of Change: The Role of Innovation

"Innovative solutions to drive continuous improvement" seems to capture the Simsbury leadership team's approach to management. Each of the solutions being pursued by Simsbury is an innovation to enhance performance. Simsbury is still in the process of finalizing the implementation of several of the changes the district decided to make, but real ownership over the initiatives is apparent. Ullman views the fall and winter of this school year as a crucial point of implementation—the 'tipping point' where new programs will start to meet needs. In that sense, the district is transitioning from a point of buy-in to complete ownership as the innovative ideas begin to show real performance results.

To ensure the smoothness of this transition, Ullman is continuing to push forward, keeping many of the same principles and strategies that she has used to help drive these efforts. The district will continue to focus on systems improvement—data-driven initiatives that focus on improving student achievement, parental satisfaction, and staffing while making the system more efficient and reducing costs. The process will continue to require the patience of its stakeholders, because it takes time to restructure and rebuild programs and processes. However, the district is able to move forward with the confidence that the new system, in addition to being well-intentioned, is also well-informed and will have a much greater capacity to serve the stakeholders within the district than it did before.

Key Reflections on the Process

Ullman speaks very highly of the process that the district has gone through, and is able to see the way that improving one system in the district has the potential to improve other systems. She emphasizes that Simsbury's use of data to drive conversations and decision-making during its special education review has affected the way they approach other discussions and decisions. She sees this change as an overall improvement of her school district's leadership capacity.

Asked to reflect on the process her district has undergone so far, she has several observations and recommendations for districts struggling with the similar issues. Ullman stresses that it is important to

Dr. Ullman (third from right) helps break ground on a new renovation/addition project at Tariffville Elementary School in June 2008.

take action. "I wish I had started this process three years ago!" she explains, referring to how difficult it can be to find the momentum to begin a comprehensive review process. Nevertheless, she cautions that while targets, timelines, and data are sufficient to set the ball rolling, real acceptance for change only arrives once the results support the theory.

Ullman also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a service mindset by articulating vision and purpose and taking the time to communicate clearly and specifically to the most crucial stakeholders. She feels that parents were a key part of her district's transition from awareness of its needs to implementation of new programs. Her advice: "Keep parents an active part of the process, and help them understand what you are doing and why."

It is also important to keep in mind that the process of systemic improvement in Simsbury took the involvement of key players and realizations within the entire system. Ullman cites a wide range of factors when reflecting on Simsbury's success-to-date. She specifically credits the enthusiasm and coherence of Helen Donaher, Betsy Gunsalus, and other key individuals; Simsbury's board members' support; her own commitment; the community's desire to improve services; the team approach of all of the top leaders in the district; the recognition of the problem as cultural and technical; the decision to address beliefs and practices; and the use of benchmarking data. All of these factors helped drive the effort and inform the decisions that the district and its stakeholders made from the beginning through the implementation of new programs rolling out this fall and winter.

Conclusion

The case study of Simsbury Public Schools presents a compelling example of a district moving to improve its offerings by increasing its openness to innovation despite functioning systems with significant momentum and support. To change a system, districts must take a systematic approach as Simsbury did. This includes a process that focuses on pursuing deep understanding of the problem, using data to craft solutions, and enlisting the buy-in of leadership all the way from the top leaders of the district to those who teach or have children in related programs. This requires leadership sustained by a compelling vision of an improved student education, with a leadership team that is willing to engage all stakeholders and incorporate major stakeholder concerns into solutions. The process is not simple or linear as the case of Simsbury illustrates, but the time has never been more opportune to systematically, comprehensively, and innovatively approach the way we serve students with special needs.

[i] *Guidelines for selecting alternatives to over reliance on paraprofessionals by Giangreco and Broer, US Office of Special Education, March 2003.*

[ii] Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, *Seeking Effective Policies and Practices for Students with Special Needs*, Spring 2009.

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From Teacher Quality to Effectiveness:
Developing a Systemic Approach

"Our challenge is to make sure every child in America is learning from an effective teacher—no matter what it takes. So today, I ask you to join President Obama and me in a new commitment to results that recognizes and rewards success in the classroom and is rooted in our common obligation to children."

– Secretary Arne Duncan in a speech to the NEA, July 2, 2009

| NICHOLAS P. MORGAN

As Secretary Duncan's articulation of the national challenge illustrates, our pursuit of improved teaching and learning has shifted in response to research findings and outcomes data: the pursuit of "highly qualified teachers" has transitioned to a pursuit of "teacher effectiveness." Race to the Top and the ESEA Blueprint ask states and local districts to establish definitions of teacher effectiveness "that are based in significant part on student growth and also include other measures, such as classroom observations of practice." No single measure of student learning, standardized test or otherwise, is a complete or fair measure of what students learn or how teachers teach.

This discussion is not a new one. Since A *Nation at Risk* was released in 1983, captivating the dialogue of education reform, a focus on teacher **quality** has been at the forefront of discussions by practitioners and researchers alike. However, a second paradigm—that of teacher **effectiveness**—has existed nearly as long. Released by the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession in 1986, *A Nation Prepared* focused on teaching professionalism and the notion of the highly *effective* teacher. A focus on improving teacher effectiveness forces us to look at student performance outcomes instead of teacher characteristics or qualifications.

Over the last fifty years, education research has focused significant resources and attention on understanding which teacher characteristics and qualifications drive classroom success.

Unfortunately, research has not been able to paint a picture where certain qualifications lead to student success. Broad categories of qualifications, like teacher preparation (including coursework, selectivity of sending institution, certification type, test scores and more), have been sliced in many ways to find nuggets of predictive information, mostly with little success. Further, since the No Child Left Behind Act's stipulations have resulted in a Highly Qualified Teacher in the vast majority of classrooms, where does the conversation progress from here?

The recent Race to the Top competitive grant process has provided a catalyst for new thinking and practical approaches to teacher effectiveness, and has helped shed light on current opportunities nationwide. Teacher effectiveness is a central tenet in each of the four "core assurances" of the program, which include college and career-ready standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution of effective teachers, data systems to support student growth and evaluation, and support and interventions for turning around the nation's lowest performing schools.

Of the 41 states responding to the first round of the Race to the Top competition, only about half of the states had quantitative growth models in place or in progress. Growth models are data models to track student achievement growth over time, allowing deeper analysis of teacher effectiveness trends. The status demonstrates that nationally, the country is still in the early stages of incorporating quantitative

student achievement outcomes in myriad applications for improved district management. Round one of Race to the Top also demonstrated a shift in the way qualitative teacher effectiveness data are being gathered. Of the 41 first-round respondents, only ten states differentiated teacher effectiveness using multiple rating categories. The current pass/fail rating categories that are commonplace do not allow for nuanced information to help improve teacher support and other related district services. Nationally, the country is still in the early stages of incorporating improved methods of collecting qualitative student achievement outcomes for human capital management. This article and its corresponding toolkit address approaches for combining qualitative and quantitative teacher effectiveness measures to improve a district's evaluation systems.

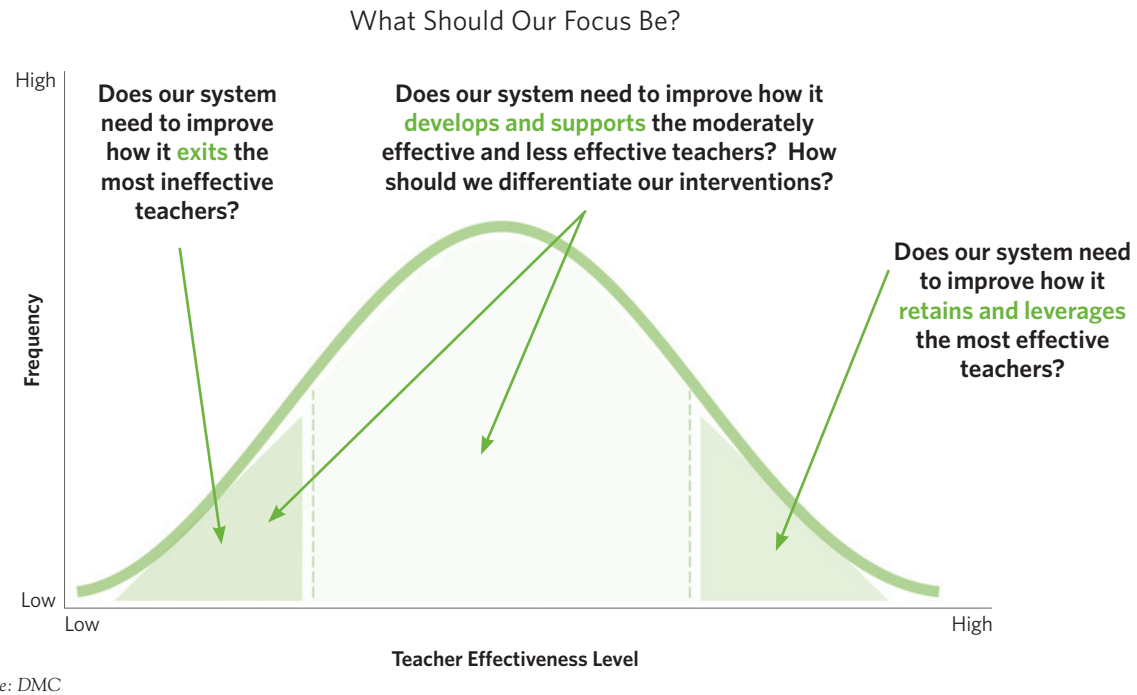
Evidence from teacher effectiveness research continues to underscore the importance of great teaching: an effective teacher can quickly change the academic trajectory of a student and an ineffective teacher risks derailing progress. Research also continues to show that teacher effectiveness is highly variable. Rather than continuing to search for evidence of what does work, a growing emphasis in the national dialogue is on policy reform based on evidence of practices that don't work. For instance, should districts continue to invest in qualifications that have no demonstrable effect on student outcomes?

Research conducted by Robert Gordon, Doug Staiger, and Tom Kane has been instrumental in drawing out some key insights regarding teacher effectiveness.[1] First, we should recognize that while small variances may exist between different categories of teacher qualifications, the bigger issue is the broad distribution of effectiveness within each category. For instance, whereas teacher certification predicts little about a teacher's overall effectiveness, variance within categories of certification is broad. This research underscores a few key conclusions, all demonstrating how much effective teaching matters for student achievement outcomes.

The research conclusion that past performance is predictive of future performance serves as one of the underpinnings for the increased use of value-added data in teacher evaluations. Breaking out performance categories allows us to focus on what we should do to 1) shift the curves and 2) manage the shape of the performance distribution. Importantly, as shown in Figure 1 below, districts need to ask some hard ▷

FIGURE 1

Developing a Teacher Effectiveness Focus



Source: DMC

questions regarding overall district strategy as they tackle systemic pursuits of teacher effectiveness. If we consider a generic performance distribution, at least three broad categories with corresponding strategic questions emerge: 1) the most effective teachers, 2) the broad middle, and 3) the least effective teachers. Once identified, what should the district's role be in managing these distinct groups? While most districts are likely to answer "We need to do all three," the more difficult questions arise when thinking about prioritization and sequencing. What should the district tackle first? When resources are limited, what should our priority be?

This begs the question: how do we manage the effectiveness curve? Is our goal to shift the entire curve to the right, or is it to fundamentally alter the shape of the distribution? How should we allocate our resources accordingly?

A widely-read report entitled *The Widget Effect* from the New Teacher Project has been an additional national catalyst in helping define concrete issues to improve teacher effectiveness.[2]

First, the overall notion that many district functions are often run without taking performance into account signals the scope of the opportunity that improved performance data might yield. Such functions as recruitment, placement, professional development, compensation, retention, and layoffs are rarely managed using teacher performance, if at all. In practice, the "widget effect" is characterized by institutional indifference to variations in teacher performance.

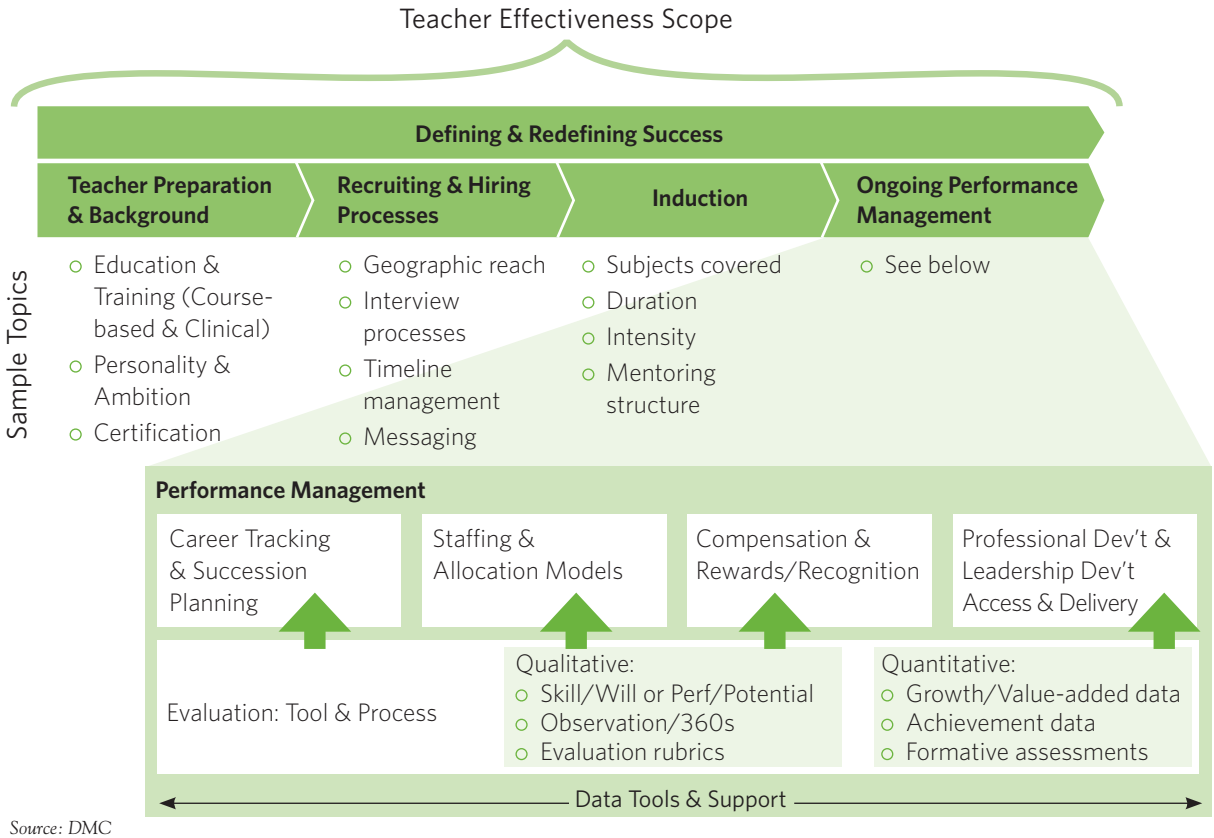
Teacher evaluation systems reflect and reinforce this indifference in several ways. *The Widget Effect* has helped a dialogue to emerge around five systemic deficiencies. They are:

- All teachers are rated good or great
- Excellence goes unrecognized
- Inadequate professional development
- No special attention to novices
- Poor performance goes unaddressed

Each of these issues helps to inform an opportunity for district leadership to rethink how teacher effective-

FIGURE 2

Teacher Effectiveness as a Management System



Source: DMC

ness is managed. How good is our teacher evaluation system? How well is it implemented? Does the performance data from our evaluation system inform the delivery of professional development? How do we allocate our development resources to those most in need, including novice teachers or those struggling? How do we reward our most effective talent?

Teacher Effectiveness as a System

The importance of a robust evaluation system has been a recent focus of major district reform agendas, often with significant national attention. How does the evaluation process play into the larger question of teacher effectiveness? How do we actually define and measure what an effective teacher looks like? In order to further define and structure the pursuit of teacher effectiveness reforms, DMC's framework, shown in Figure 2, lays out key human capital components, with an emphasis on the role played by good evaluation tools and processes.

As the framework shows, teacher effectiveness in its entirety is a far-reaching topic that addresses most human capital elements that involve teachers. From the moment a prospective teacher begins his/her training to the day that teacher exits the profession, each stage offers an opportunity for the district to rethink how it can improve and support teacher performance and student outcomes.

Overall, districts should begin by defining what success looks like for the system overall, as well as more specifically for key stages in a teacher's career progression. For example, how do you really measure how successful your induction program is? How closely tied is that measurement to student outcomes? DMC focuses significant attention on the power of outcomes-based management, and teacher effectiveness is no exception. Articulating specific performance goals and managing toward real results allows the district to focus its resources and measure progress. For DMC, these performance goals should span student achievement as well as operational and financial effectiveness. Ultimately, for teacher effectiveness to be managed cohesively, the district will need a common vision and articulation of what effective teaching looks like, allowing teachers and administrators alike to pursue a common goal.

As introduced above, improving teacher effectiveness can no longer be a conversation simply about pursuing different teacher qualifications. Districts must manage performance more actively on an ongoing basis, and allocate limited resources in a more strategic manner. "Performance management" is a buzz phrase used in a variety of ways in education. DMC thinks of performance management as a collection of activities that seek to increase the overall performance of the district toward clear systemic goals. For teacher effectiveness, performance management must be driven by the teacher evaluation "engine", which in turn drives a variety of related human capital processes. Performance management processes need to be supported by data systems that support putting key information and insights in decision-makers' hands.

> "Districts have a significant opportunity to rethink how professional development is delivered, shifting toward models where professional development is aligned more closely with the district's vision for effective teaching."

From an ongoing process perspective, performance management includes a focus on the delivery of targeted professional development to support teachers' growth and development. Districts have a significant opportunity to rethink how professional development is delivered, shifting toward models where professional development is aligned more closely with the district's vision for effective teaching. A vision of managing teacher effectiveness as a support system versus one that has a punitive focus is critically dependent on its orientation to professional development.

Performance management also includes managing incentives, such as rethinking compensation and recognition. While not the focus of this *Spotlight*, compensation reform continues to evolve nationally, with a variety of models being evaluated. Districts are exploring and implementing innovative combinations ▷

of performance-based financial bonuses, as well as considering using performance to modify base pay models such as traditional "steps and lanes" schedules.

Additionally, as the Race to the Top core assurance states, teacher effectiveness is also about the *equitable distribution* of effective teachers. Performance management processes should also enable a discussion to address the intentional distribution of the most effective teachers across the district. Staffing models should also be well informed by the data generated from robust teacher evaluation systems. Finally, additional policy-related decisions such as tenure policy should also be based on rigorous analysis of teacher effectiveness data.

> "For a fuller picture of teacher effectiveness, it is important to combine qualitative measures of teacher practice with quantitative measures of student achievement outcomes."

A Focus on the Evaluation System

Successful evaluation systems need two main components: 1) a set of tools, including rubrics and scoring mechanisms, and 2) a good process to drive timely use of the tool with fidelity. Districts may reflect on their current practices and find that they have one but not the other. A poor tool will not yield effectiveness insights for the teacher or district, and a poor process may yield low compliance, low fidelity, problems with inter-rater reliability, high confusion, and more. A good set of tools should provide useful information to support key decisions in the overall scope of teacher effectiveness. It should be evaluative, but it should also be developmental. Further, it should be simple enough to be understood and used without misinterpretation. Perhaps the most important hallmark of a good process is that it is actually followed with fidelity. How would you rate your district?

Many districts may find that both the tools and the process of teacher evaluation need a second look. While there is no single established "best practice" for teacher evaluation, guidance for structural considerations is becoming more commonplace. For instance, the New Teacher Project recommends six design principles:[3] 1) an annual process, 2) clear, rigorous expectations, 3) multiple measures, 4) multiple ratings, 5) regular feedback, and 6) significance.

Regarding process, frequency of evaluation has been identified as a significant issue. Data from the National Center for Teacher Quality on collective bargaining agreements has highlighted the variability and infrequency of teacher evaluations in the country's fifty largest school districts.[4] For tenured teachers, only 17 districts require evaluations at least once a year. For untenured teachers, the number of districts receiving annual evaluations only rises to 26. How the process is conducted is also of great interest to the broader teacher effectiveness pursuit.

Do the measurement approaches (typically classroom observations) have sufficient rigor or frequency to conduct a truly useful evaluation?

Regarding the tools, the structure of the evaluation rubric itself is the source of significant attention in districts nationwide. Many evaluation models exist that have received significant attention for their structures, but little consensus exists regarding a single preferred approach. More comprehensive models may have a higher number of indicators, but may sacrifice ease of use. Conversely, a district may prioritize simplicity to encourage frequency of implementation or a low time burden on staff. Districts may want to modify an existing structure to adapt to local context and needs. Finally, is there a possibility to broaden the use of other qualitative measurement approaches such as peer or student surveys? Further detail on these structural design elements are addressed in the accompanying DMC toolkit item: *How to Design a Multidimensional Teacher Evaluation System*.

Many typical teacher evaluation forms are constructed on a "pass/fail" basis, which does not allow for a more granular understanding of performance, and does not allow for more nuanced teacher support. What the tool itself measures should be scrutinized to match the district's vision for effective teaching.

Finally, as districts look to redesign performance measurement, it is important to consider what the core stakeholder group involved—the teachers—think about the topic. Survey data shows that what teachers

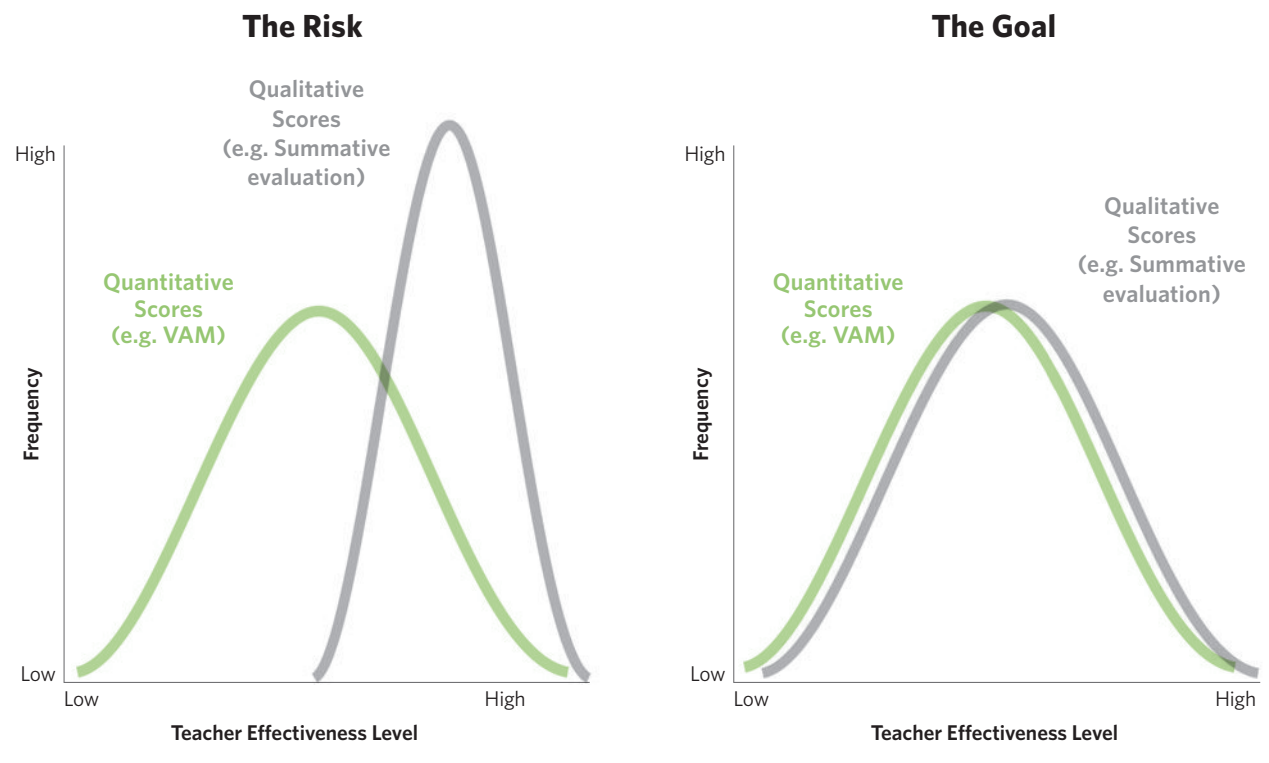
consider accurate performance measures may surprise you. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in conjunction with Scholastic and Harris Interactive, surveyed forty thousand teachers in 2009, asking them their views on the accuracy of various performance measures.[5] Interestingly, traditional principal observation and review ranked roughly mid-pack for accuracy as a performance measurement approach, with about 20% of teachers reporting it as "very accurate." Regarding quantitative data, teachers appeared reluctant to embrace achievement status as a measure, ranking it lowest of all measures in terms of accuracy. However, using student achievement growth over the course of an academic year was the second-most accurate measure listed, with 55% of respondents calling the measure "very accurate." The most accurate measure, reported by 60% of survey respondents to be "very accurate," was student engagement, although it was not clear which specific measurement protocols the teachers had in mind.

Quantitative & Qualitative Measures

Historically, most teacher evaluations have focused on teacher practice only, using a set of qualitative measurement approaches such as classroom evaluations and artifact analysis. For a fuller picture of teacher effectiveness, it is important to combine qualitative measures of teacher practice with quantitative measures of student achievement outcomes. The national dialogue has recently centered significantly on quantitative metrics to track teacher effectiveness. With high-profile stories capturing national headlines – such as workforce reductions in Washington, D.C. based largely on quantitative teacher effectiveness data, or the *LA Times*' report on the Los Angeles Unified School District's teacher performance using value-added data, the debate over appropriate use of student achievement data in teacher evaluations has been raging. At the heart of this debate are value-added statistical models, which attribute a portion of student achievement growth over time to a specific factor such as a school, teacher, or program. This article addresses these models in further detail below. ▷

FIGURE 3

Matching Qualitative and Quantitative Teacher Effectiveness Measures



Source: DMC

The federal Race to the Top program has served as a catalyst for this conversation, as states devoted significant effort to include quantitative measures for academic growth in their plans. Importantly, despite apparent agreement that multiple measures are a good thing, there is little consensus about the weight that qualitative or quantitative measures should be given in a teacher's summative evaluation. Many states, such as Tennessee, Rhode Island, and Florida set requirements that at least half of the total be student achievement-based. The Washington D.C. public school system, with its innovative IMPACT teacher evaluation program, has no less than twenty different categories of evaluations for different groups of employees, each with different weighting of quantitative and qualitative components. Almost by definition, district evaluation systems that combine teacher practice and student achievement evaluation components are new, and a knowledge-base about the how these systems actually works in practice is still nascent.

The challenge that districts face in combining qualitative data regarding teacher practice and quantitative data on student achievement outcomes is that the stories these data sets tell regarding teacher effectiveness might be very different at the outset. In a world such as the one described in *The Widget Effect*, where teachers predominantly get high marks for performance, how will the system react to a conflicting picture based on student achievement data? This potential conflict is demonstrated in Figure 3. With fundamentally different performance distributions possible from quantitative and qualitative measurement approaches, districts must focus on developing systems to bring the distributions in line with one another. Essentially, this illustrative example underscores a significant research agenda for the coming years: which qualitative measurements and systems actually correlate with student achievement outcomes? While selective studies have been conducted on specific evaluation rubrics, this field of study has little widespread practical research to guide new rubric design for qualitative measures to correlate with student achievement outcomes. For example, in Hamilton County, Tennessee, where a new evaluation system is being implemented, the district will investigate correlation to the state's value-added system (TVAAS) over the coming year and adjust the system based on its findings.

Another good example of how this challenge needs to be managed is in New Haven, Connecticut, where the district received significant media praise for its collaborative effort with the union to redesign the teacher evaluation system. The new system gives teachers a summative ranking on a one-to-five scale on two dimensions: 1) Instructional Practice and Professional Values (weighted 80%/20%) and 2) Student Learning Growth. In this type of structure, it is possible that a teacher be given a low rating for Instructional Practice and Professional Values, but demonstrate high growth for their students. Conversely, it is possible for a teacher to demonstrate high scores for Instructional Practice and Professional Values, but have little student growth. In either situation, focused policy review needs to be conducted outside the context of the specific teacher's evaluation, to determine why such a mismatch is occurring and what, if anything, needs to be corrected. In New Haven, the individual ratings will also be reviewed to ensure that the given rating in these situations is fair and accurate based on evidence shared by the instructional manager and teacher. Individual ratings may be adjusted for unfairness or inconsistency.

Using Quantitative Student Achievement Data in Evaluations

Many districts have acknowledged the need to have a greater connection between their evaluation systems and student outcomes in order to measure and improve overall teacher effectiveness. However, *how* this should take place and with which data has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate recently. First, the usual caveats apply. Only certain subjects are tested, and even then, the overall quality of the insights is dependent on appropriate test design.

"Achievement" or "status" data compares results of a snapshot in time to a benchmark, and therefore offers few real insights for individual teacher effectiveness. Likewise, "improvement" data, which looks at the change in these snapshots over time, measures the academic performance over time, but for different cohorts of students, so again offers few real insights for the effectiveness of any individual teacher. Beginning significantly with changes to Adequate Yearly Progress measurement under the No Child Left Behind Act, *growth* has increasingly become the focus of the national dialogue. The use of the term "growth model"

can encompass different analytical approaches, however, and much recent attention has been focused on "value-added" models which some consider a subset of growth methodologies.

Generally speaking, growth models track the test scores of the same students from one period to the next. For example, gain scores can be computed to compare the performance of the current year's fourth graders with that of the same group of students last year, when they were in third grade. However, growth models usually do not control for student or school background factors, and therefore they do not attempt to address which specific factors are responsible for student growth. This is the goal of value-added models, which are complex statistical models that isolate the effect of a teacher, program, or school. Further adding to the complexity is the fact that many different value-added models are being used across the country.

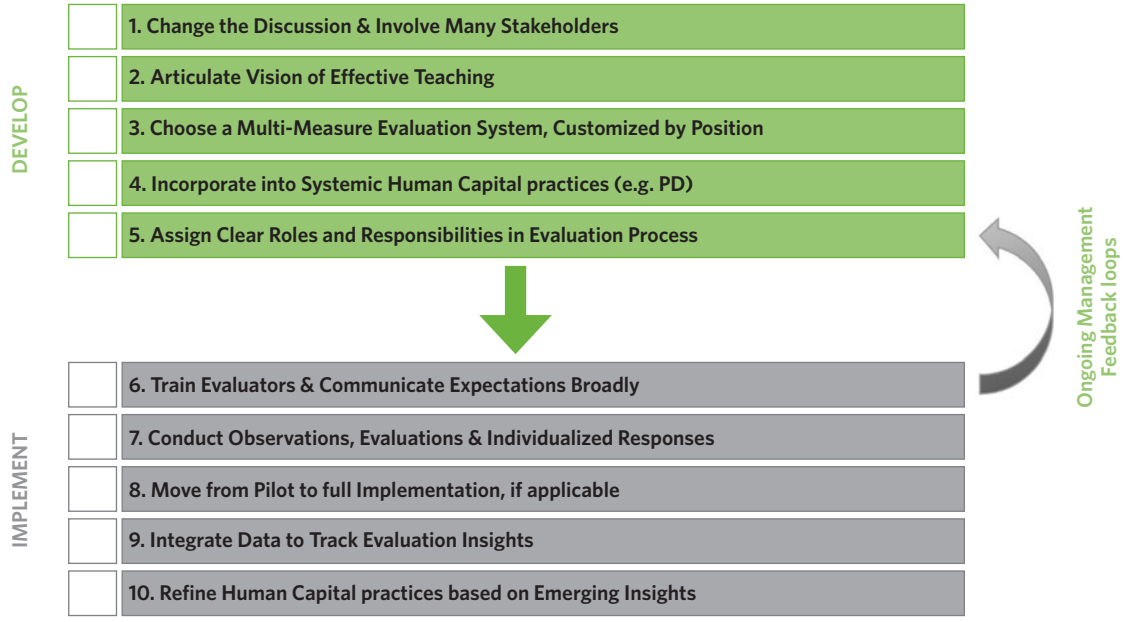
Value-added models have been the source of most of the scrutiny and debate surrounding such prominent endeavors at the Washington D.C. public schools, the *LA Times* exposé on LAUSD, and similar freedom-of-information act requests by various media outlets for data from the New York City Department of Education. While beyond the scope of this *Spotlight*, understanding value-added models is a complex endeavor. The criticism few would disagree with is that these approaches are best debated by professional statisticians.

So, what exactly is a value-added model? Value-added is the difference between two "possible outcomes": 1) the observed outcome the teacher (and school) actually experienced and, 2) the expected outcome given an "average teacher experience" or given the student's latent academic growth rate. In other words, value-added is equal to the actual growth minus the predicted growth. We want to see value-added scores that are above the prediction.

Many strengths and weaknesses have been addressed with specific value-added modeling approaches, but DMC remains optimistic that this type of quantitative approach to measuring teacher effectiveness is a valuable addition to a suite of measurement components. Pursuing a new, more informed way of measuring teacher effectiveness, and using that data to improve ▷

FIGURE 4

DMC's 10 Steps for a New Teacher Evaluation System



Source: DMC

overall systemic management is an innovation in the world of K-12 leadership and management.

As DMC has highlighted in past work, innovation requires testing and refinement, and the use of value-added methods to improve teacher effectiveness should be pursued with an innovation mindset.

Further, the recent decision by the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse to modify the definition of "gold standard" research will allow greater use and application of quasi-experimental research methods like value-added modeling. Value-added modeling can be used to pursue policy insights for human capital dimensions such as tenure, recruiting, staffing, and compensation policies, all of which are critical components of the performance management system outlined above.

Developing and Implementing a Teacher Effectiveness System

As shown in Figure 4, DMC has designed a process for districts to pursue a more robust teacher effectiveness program that emphasizes the systemic nature of teacher evaluations. The first two steps are critical for laying the foundation of a new system in the district. First, districts need to change the nature of the discussion about teacher effectiveness in the district and involve a broad range of stakeholders in that discussion. Second, districts should articulate a clear vision of what great teaching should represent.

The third step in the process is to create a multi-measure evaluation system that assesses how well the vision for great teaching is being met. The brief toolkit exercise included in this magazine is intended to stir critical thinking for this process. Decisions need to be made as to which qualitative and quantitative measures to use, who will gather this information, how and how often it will be gathered, and how much weight to ascribe to the various measures chosen. DMC offers more in-depth tools for supporting this process as well. The evaluation system should form the basis upon which developmental teacher support can be provided. The key design elements should support broader conversations to address other positions, in particular those where a closer articulation to student outcome responsibilities should be defined.

Great teacher evaluations should support teacher development, and should also provide critical information to help improve a variety of district-wide human capital systems, including recruiting and staffing models. Once the revised evaluation system has been agreed upon, the district can proceed to the final two steps in the development process: aligning human capital practices, such as professional development, to the vision for effective teaching created in the previous steps, and assigning clear roles and responsibilities for execution.

The final five steps in DMC's process address implementation stages. Perhaps most important is step six, where training and communications occur broadly. Rollout and change management issues are addressed in steps seven and eight, which should be designed with focus on the local context. Step nine addresses the necessary data infrastructure and analysis to support the system. Finally, step ten highlights a need for ongoing alignment of human capital activities based on the insights generated from the new system. This system is designed to be a continuous improvement cycle, and should assist the district in becoming a true learning organization. DMC offers a variety of tools and services to assist districts with this process.

As districts pursue teacher effectiveness, direct and indirect costs should also be part of the discussion. DMC believes that pursuing key steps in teacher effectiveness reform can mean a lot work, but that it can be done quickly and relatively inexpensively. Further, DMC encourages districts to consider whether systemic improvements may actually result in greater fiscal efficiency for the district.

1 Gordon, R., Kane, T. and Staiger, D. Kane "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job," *The Hamilton Project* white paper 2006-01, The Hamilton Project, Washington, DC, 2006.

2 Weisberg D., Sexton S., Mulhern J., and Keeling D. "The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Teacher Differences," The New Teacher Project, 2009.

3 "Teacher Evaluation 2.0: Six design Standards," The New Teacher Project, 2010.

4 National Center for Teacher Quality TR3 Database.

5 "Primary Sources: America's Teachers on America's Schools" A Project of Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010.

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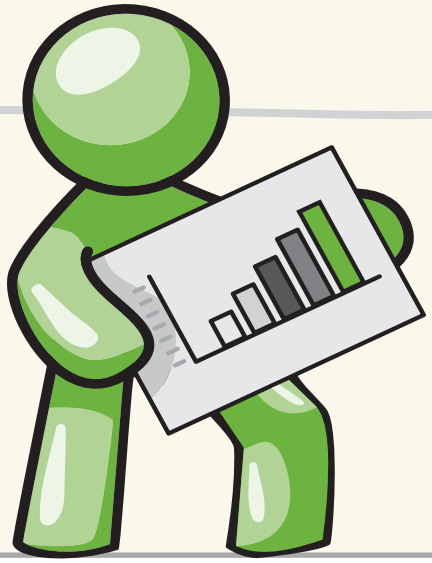
How to Design a Multidimensional Teacher Evaluation System

With research showing that most teacher characteristics and qualifications have little predictive effect on student achievement outcomes, the national dialogue has shifted from teacher quality to teacher effectiveness. Race to the Top and the ESEA Blueprint ask states and local districts to establish definitions of teacher effectiveness "that are based in significant part on student growth and also include other measures, such as classroom observations of practice." Reform emphasis is now on robust evaluation systems that tie quantitative and qualitative measures of effectiveness together. Assessing teacher effectiveness along these dimensions requires a multidimensional approach that includes both teacher practice and student learning.

DMC has designed a process to guide districts in creating a teacher effectiveness program that takes into account the specific needs and constraints of each district. The process incorporates the multiple measures and multiple ratings that we at DMC believe need to be included to create a powerful evaluation system. The summary tool on the following pages outlines the key issues that need to be determined in designing a teacher evaluation system for your district. A complete workbook including worksheets to guide the discussion and design of individual measures and to work through the weighting for each measure is available to members at www.dmcouncil.org.



Turn the page for your DMC Toolkit ▷

How to Design a Multidimensional Teacher

Category of Teacher to Evaluate (e.g. core/tested, non-core, etc.): _____

	Measurement Approach	Description	Pros/Cons
Teacher Practice/ Qualitative Measures	Classroom Observations	Observations of classroom instruction. Observations can take a wide range of formats.	**Pros:** ○ Considered by most to be the "gold standard" **Cons:** ○ Expensive in time, resources, and manpower ○ Announced or plannned observations may not be representative ○ Possible problems with variability due to observer's training or other biases ○ Potential to be disruptive to the instructional process
	Analysis/Rating of Classroom Artifacts	A qualitative professional judgment and scoring of a set of classroom artifacts. Classroom artifacts may include the following: lesson plans, curriculum units, student work samples, audio or video and/or classroom discussion transcripts, and more.	**Pros:** ○ Allows asynchronous reflection on teacher's classroom ○ Provides feedback on specific classroom tactics ○ Less costly than classroom observations **Cons:** ○ Sample artifacts may not be representative ○ May not correlate with student achievement outcomes
	Analysis/Rating of Teacher Portfolio	A qualitative professional judgment of a teacher portfolio. A portfolio may include the following: a summary of teaching experience and responsibilities, a reflective statement of teaching philosophy and goals, a discussion of teaching methods and strategies, activities undertaken to improve teaching, and a statement of goals and plans for the future.	**Pros:** ○ Encourages self-reflection and long-range planning ○ Less costly than classroom observations **Cons:** ○ Sample artifacts may not be representative ○ May not correlate with student achievement outcomes
	Teacher Self-evaluation	The teacher completes a self-scoring rubric that may address the following areas: classroom environment, curriculum and instruction, planning and scheduling, documentation and assessment, interactions with families, and more.	**Pros:** ○ Encourages self-reflection **Cons:** ○ Possibly uncorrelated with student achievement outcomes
	Stakeholder Input from Standardized Surveys (Peers, Students, and/or Parents)	Solicitation of feedback using standardized survey instruments on specific dimensions of effective teaching (e.g. professional responsibilities or role in the community).	**Pros:** ○ Provides additional voice to evaluation process ○ May drive behavior change and encourage a "customer service" mindset **Cons:** ○ May be culturally difficult to adopt
Student Achievement/ Quantitative Measures	Achievement or "Improvement" data: Individual Classroom or School-wide	Improvement models are used to measure the change in test results for a teacher or school by comparing status at two points in time—but not for the same students. These models implicitly assume that student populations remain fundamentally similar over time.	**Pros:** ○ Accountability data is readily available ○ Easier to understand than VAM or Growth models ○ Assumes student population characteristics are similar enough to compare overall achievement levels **Cons:** ○ Data does not account for uncontrollable factors
	Growth data: Individual Classroom or School-wide	Growth models track the test scores of the same students from one year to the next to determine the extent of their progress. Growth models usually do not control for student or school background factors, and therefore they do not attempt to address which factors are responsible for student growth.	**Pros:** ○ Data focuses on cohort growth, not static achievement levels **Cons:** ○ Appropriate data is difficult to assemble ○ Data is difficult to understand and use to improve classroom effectiveness
	Value-added Data: Individual Classroom or School-wide	With most models, the value-added estimate for a school or a teacher is the difference between the observed improvement of the students and the expected improvement (after taking account of differences among students that might be related to their academic achievement).	**Pros:** ○ Data is most precise method of measuring collective performance effect ○ School-wide measurement of improvement can build collaboration **Cons:** ○ Statistical models may be flawed, misused, or misinterpreted

Evaluation System

Readiness Level	Who	When
Will you do this? How? What are the potential barriers to implementation?	Who needs to be involved? What will their role be?	By when will this happen? How frequently?
	○ School Principal? Other qualified, designated reviewer?	○ Scheduled or unscheduled? Short or long?
	○ School Principal? Other professionals?	
	○ School Principal alone? School Principal and other professionals?	
	○ Teacher. Teacher may choose to supplement their own reflections with input from peers, students, or families through surveys, etc.	
	○ Peers? Students? Parents?	

Turn the page for more ▷

Weighting

It is important to consider how much each measurement approach (e.g., classroom observations, parent input, classroom growth data) will weigh in the total evaluation tool. This worksheet is intended to help you summarize these different weights.

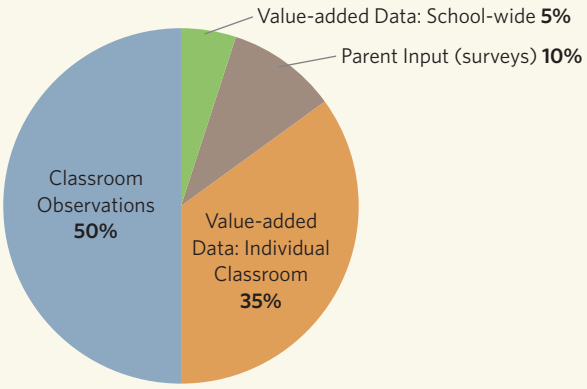
How many different types of evaluations will you have, considering data availability and differences in subject matter taught?

- ○ One for all teachers
- ○ Two (e.g., for tested and non-tested)
- ○ Three (e.g., for tested core, non-tested core, non-core)
- ○ Four or more

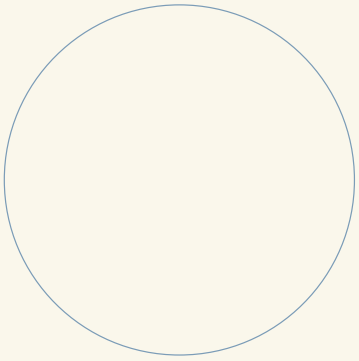
How will you weight the quantitative and qualitative elements chosen?
(e.g., 100% qualitative vs. 100% quantitative vs. 80/20 vs. 20/80 vs. 50/50)

Complete the pie chart below, providing labels and weighting for each measure that will be included in your evaluation tool. If there are multiple types of evaluations, fill out a pie chart for each.

EXAMPLE:
Type: Core ELA/Math (3rd-11th grade)



Type: _____



What will the sum total of all of this information be used for? (Check all that apply)

- ○ Summative Evaluation
- ○ Professional Development
- ○ Discipline
- ○ Commendation
- ○ Promotion
- ○ Other

Are there potential barriers to the weighting system you have selected?

DMC's Leadership Development Meeting

From Teacher Quality to Effectiveness: Developing a Systemic Approach

Bill McCormack

DMC's Fall Leadership Development Meeting

Landa McLaurin (left), Executive Director–School Support, and Jarrod Bolte, Coordinator–New Teacher Support, both of Baltimore City Public Schools (MD).

John Mirra (left), Assistant Superintendent–Department of Human Resources, Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VA), and Michael Hairston, President, Fairfax Education Association.

DMC held its annual Leadership Development Meeting on November 12th at The Langham Hotel in Boston. The oversubscribed event entitled *From Teacher Quality to Effectiveness: Developing a Systemic Approach* included leadership teams from 26 school districts, representing 14 states and over one million students. Participants had the opportunity to meet each other and exchange ideas at a reception held the evening before. ▷

The event itself included an overview of the topic of Teacher Effectiveness, and focused on a discussion of DMC's 10 Steps for a New Teacher Evaluation System (Figure 1), a process to help districts pursue a more robust and systemic approach to teacher effectiveness. During a working group session, participants were divided according to their district teams and began to work on an in-depth teacher evaluation toolkit developed by DMC. This workbook helps guide discussions and decision-making around which qualitative and quantitative measures to use, and how much weight to ascribe to the various measures selected. The day also included a case study on Hamilton County Schools of Tennessee—a district that is currently rolling out a new teacher evaluation system. The day was full of lively discussion and inquiry into the topic, and DMC is excited to continue to work with districts as they strive to enhance their teacher effectiveness systems.

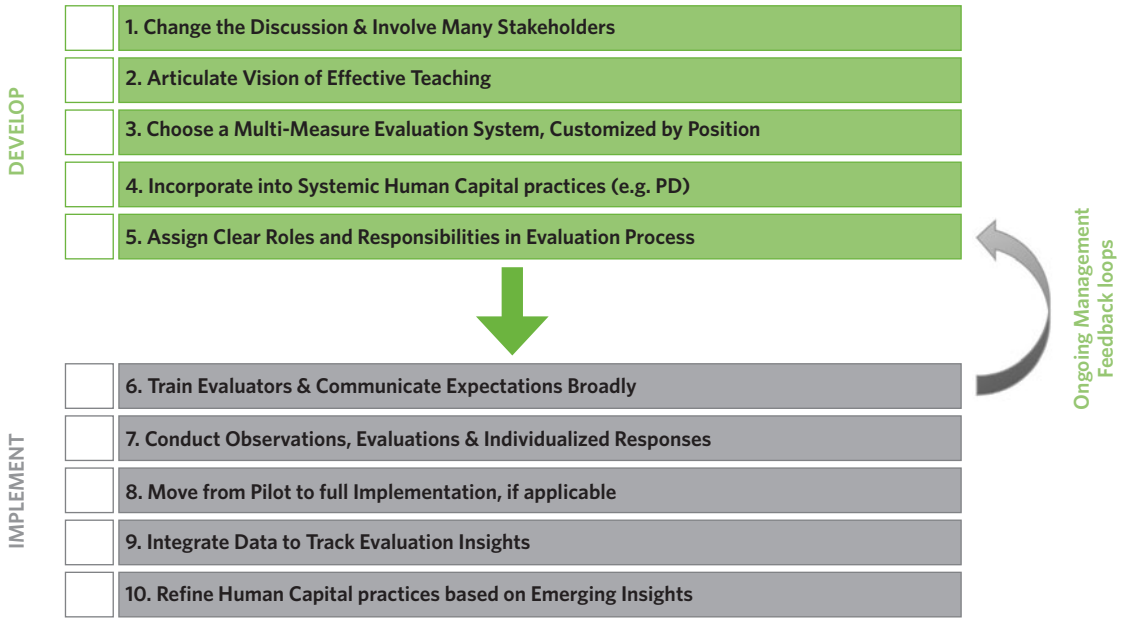
From left to right: Susan Lusi, Superintendent of Portsmouth School Department (RI); Michael Hairston, President of Fairfax Education Association; Jack Dale, Superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools (VA); and Claudia Rodriguez, Executive Director- Human Resources, Dallas Independent School District (TX).

Tom Moore, Assistant Superintendent of West Hartford Public Schools (CT).

DMC's Court Chilton and John Kim.

FIGURE 1

10 Steps for a New Teacher Evaluation System



Source: DMC

Chris Tranberg, Assistant Principal of Simsbury Public Schools (CT).

Jarrod Bolte (left), Coordinator–New Teacher Support, Baltimore City Public Schools (MD), and Colleen Jermain, Assistant Superintendent of Portsmouth School Department (RI).

Cathy Thornton (left), Director of Special Education, and Barbara Leeds, Director of Human Resources, both of Joint School District #2 (ID).

INSIDE DMC

Congratulations to Arlene Ackerman, 2010 winner of the Richard R. Green Award

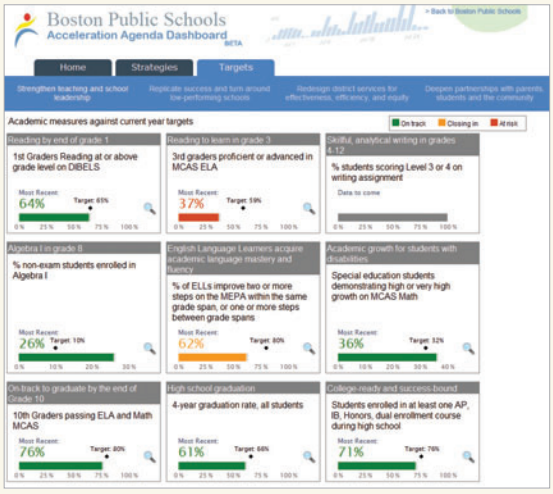
Arlene Ackerman, Superintendent of the Philadelphia School District and DMC Advisory Board Member, is the 2010 winner of the Richard R. Green Award in Urban Education. The Green Award, named for the first African American chancellor of the New York City public schools, is sponsored by the Council of Great City Schools, Aramark, and Voyage-Expanded Learning. It is given each year to a past or present superintendent or outstanding school board member from one of the 65 largest school systems in the country in recognition of outstanding leadership in urban education.

"Arlene Ackerman is one of the best big-city school superintendents in the country and is most worthy of the nation's highest individual award in urban education," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. "She is smart, dedicated, innovative, effective, and completely committed to our urban schoolchildren." Casserly hailed Ackerman's Imagine 2014, the five-year blueprint for school reform, a success, and commended her strategy of funneling more resources to needier schools and expanding school choice.

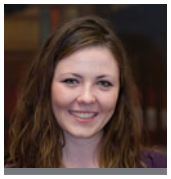
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Boston Public Schools Launches a Data Dashboard

Boston Public Schools (BPS) just added to its website a beta-version of a real-time accountability dashboard. The new dashboard allows users to view district-level performance based on MCAS scores, graduation rates, the percentage of students enrolled in college-level courses, and a variety of other measures. Later this winter, the data will be available for each of the district's 135 schools. Superintendent Carol Johnson has set ambitious goals for the district with the Acceleration Agenda, a five-year strategic plan to transform the Boston Public Schools. The dashboard allows the public to view actual academic performance against the annual goals the Acceleration Agenda has set. With a firm belief that student success depends on great schools and a supportive community, the Acceleration Agenda calls for deepening ties with the district's constituents; the dashboard is part of the effort to improve communication and allow the public to track the district's progress.



BPS has launched this data dashboard in collaboration with The District Management Council. DMC is working with districts to develop performance dashboards for monitoring and managing progress toward their goals.



AMY M. SUTHERLAND IS IS AN ASSOCIATE AT THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT ASUTHERLAND@DMCOUNCIL.ORG.

SUPERINTENDENTS' STRATEGY SUMMIT

JANUARY 20-21, 2011

WESTIN TIMES SQUARE, NEW YORK CITY

Strategic Planning: Putting Your Strategic Plan Into Action During the Fiscal Crisis

The January 2011 Superintendents' Strategy Summit will chart a process for how districts can use the recession as an opportunity to put their strategic plans into action. Using the plans that districts have already created as a foundation, participants will address:

- Tools for value proposition and district dashboards that identify and track key metrics;
- Techniques of scenario planning that predict the future of these metrics;
- Methods of budgeting, decision-making, and communication that translate this information into a targeted approach that connects the strategic plan to ongoing operations.

THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
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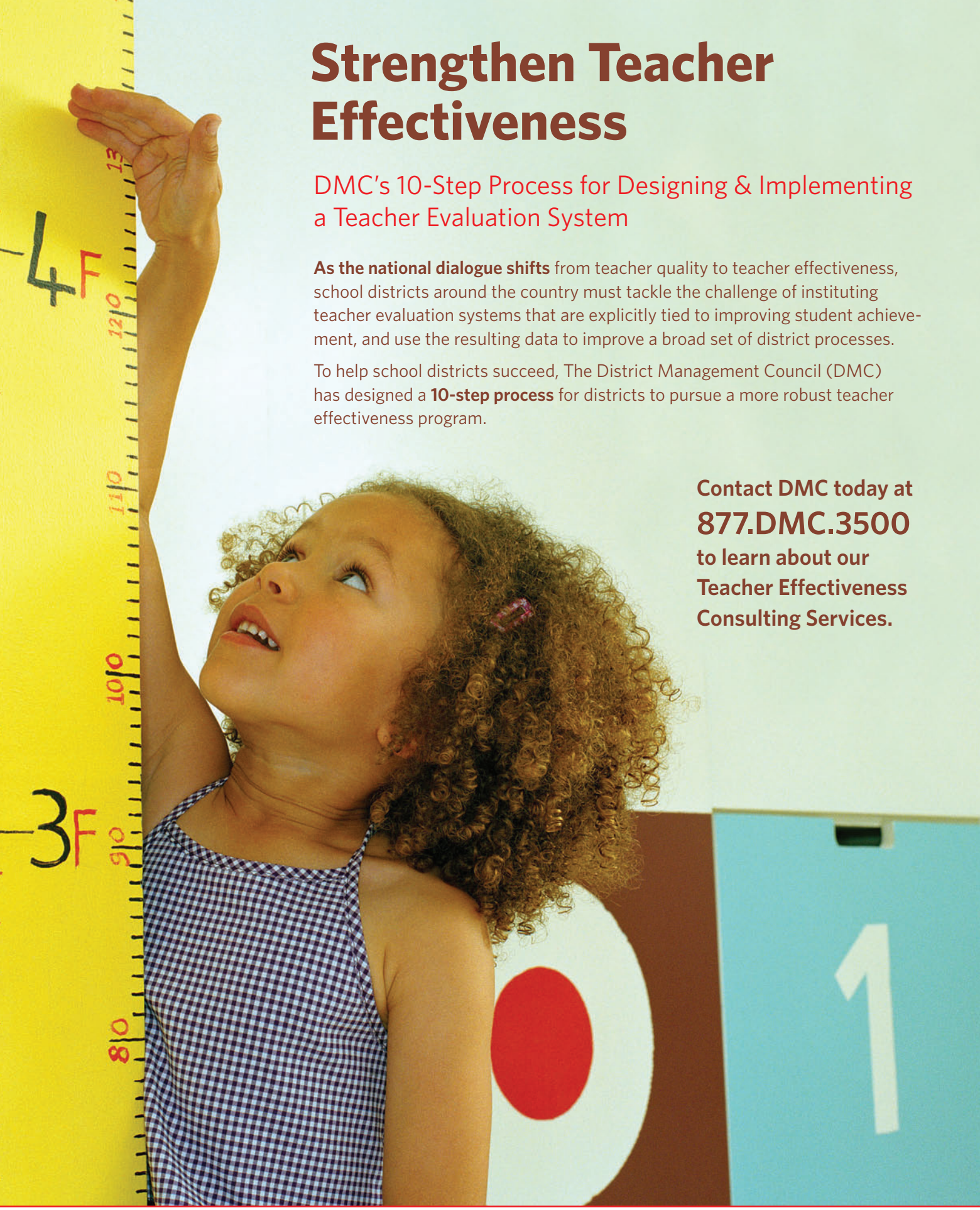
To register or learn more, visit www.dmcouncil.org/events or call 877-DMC-3500.



Strengthen Teacher Effectiveness

DMC's 10-Step Process for Designing & Implementing a Teacher Evaluation System

As the national dialogue shifts from teacher quality to teacher effectiveness, school districts around the country must tackle the challenge of instituting teacher evaluation systems that are explicitly tied to improving student achievement, and use the resulting data to improve a broad set of district processes.

To help school districts succeed, The District Management Council (DMC) has designed a **10-step process** for districts to pursue a more robust teacher effectiveness program.

Contact DMC today at
877.DMC.3500
to learn about our Teacher Effectiveness Consulting Services.

Call 877.DMC.3500 or visit http://dmcouncil.org/teacher-effectiveness to receive a FREE copy of our Manager's Toolkit: *Guide for Developing a Multidimensional Teacher Evaluation System.*